# "Circling the Terrain":

## The Pattern of Seamus Heaney's Poetic Discovery

## 1966 –1987

by

FRANCES DIXON


A thesis submitted for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy of
The Australian National University

August 1991

## *STATEMENT*

I, Frances Dixon, declare that this thesis has never before been submitted, either in part or in whole, to this or any other university for the purposes of a higher degree. To the best of my knowledge and belief, this thesis is an original piece of research, and except where otherwise acknowledged, all conclusions are my own.

(Signed) F Dixon

## *ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS*

This study was carried out with the assistance of a Commonwealth Postgraduate Research Award, and I am happy to acknowledge the help of many people while I was working on it.

I am deeply indebted to my supervisor, David Parker, for his advice and guidance, and to my adviser, Jane Adamson, for her enthusiasm and willing support. Their questions and insights helped me to clarify much about poetry and criticism.

As head of the English department, Fred Langman encouraged my progress throughout the study, and urged it along its way. His confidence in me, his understanding, and his unfailing sense of humour were a great help.

A number of friends read and commented on the thesis in whole or in part. I am especially grateful to Marie-Louise Ayres, Sam Goldberg, Simon Haines, Penny Hanley and Alex Rombouts for their valuable suggestions.

My greatest debt is to my husband and family. I particularly appreciate Page Dixon's generous and practical help.

## *ABSTRACT*

"Circling the terrain":
The Pattern of Seamus Heaney's Poetic Discovery
1966-1987

Existing criticism of Seamus Heaney's poetry is in the main very useful, yet the common tendency to chart his development as one-directional simplifies the nature of his achievement. The roots of much disagreement among critics can be found in the tendency to read his development in terms of biographical and political change. I argue that Heaney's process of discovery is not straightforward and cumulative; that his poetry traces the contours of his continual loss and recovery, through language, of his separateness from and connection with the earth and its people; and that while his later discoveries grow out of his early works, they sometimes cost him the loss of earlier imaginative gains.

The introduction surveys the principal commentary on Heaney's poetry, including his own, to indicate some of the richness that explanatory accounts of the poetry can miss, and to follow the poet's imagination as he circles around an increasingly familiar terrain of ideas and imagery. The six chapters explore Heaney's development through his seven volumes of poetry, in chronological order from 1966 to 1987. Chapter 1 studies his beginnings in *Death of a Naturalist* (1966) and *Door into the Dark* (1969), showing how he narrows the circle to his first small patch, the cradle of his being, staring into the well of the self in his attempts to reconnect with the child within him and to establish an echo, create a sound which will travel out into the wider circle of the world but which will also return to him in a new form. The second chapter, on *Wintering Out* (1973), explores how, as Heaney's physical horizons widen, he concentrates on this same patch, and in gathering and storing impressions of his world he discovers ambiguities that echo yet depart from those that puzzled him earlier. Chapter 3 on *North* (1975) and Chapter 4 on *Field Work* (1979) argue that these volumes, which are commonly regarded as exhibiting respectively an engagement with and retreat from the political realities of Northern Ireland in the 1970s, show the poet negotiating a way back to his earliest intuitions in search of a way to unite his internal contradictions without dissolving them. Chapter 5 traces how in *Station Island* he returns to and tries to escape beyond the confines of those negotiations. The final chapter argues that Heaney's achievement in *The Haw Lantern* (1987) emerges out of his earliest intuitions that the "clarified space" in which he writes his best poetry exists at the point of intersection between separateness and allegiance.

## *CONTENTS*

## *NOTE*

The first reference to a work of poetry or criticism is cited in a footnote; all subsequent references are incorporated into the text.

## *INTRODUCTION*

This study of Seamus Heaney's poetry takes the poet's distinctive practice of "circling the terrain" as a way of charting his progress and reaching the heart of his poetic achievement. It traces the dynamic of Heaney's poetry, as it explores his connections with his land and his people in a continuous process of turning back and moving on again, as he catches, loses and recovers some of the entangled threads that bind him to his own patch of ground. Like the central figure in "The Diviner", the poet mediates between the land he knows so intimately and his fellow men; his vocation continually sends him "Circling the terrain, hunting the pluck/Of water".[1] Heaney's quest is to establish a connection through which the hidden springs of life can "broadcast" and take root in the hearts of mankind. "Circling the terrain" describes both the subject of much of Heaney's poetry and the style of his exploration, and a reader who enters into his poetry shares the mixture of wonder and confusion of the figure who ventures into "The Plantation":

> Any point in that wood
> Was a centre, birch trunks
> Ghosting your bearings,
> Improvising charmed rings
>
> Wherever you stopped.
> Though you walked a straight line
> It might be a circle you travelled
> With toadstools and stumps
>
> Always repeating themselves.
> Or did you re-pass them?[2]

Whatever way the critic approaches the poetry, it will take him or her on its circuits rather than in a straight line. For this reason it seems particularly fruitful to follow the order of Heaney's own journey and

---

[1] *Death of a Naturalist* (London: Faber and Faber, 1966), p.24.
[2] *Door into the Dark* (London: Faber and Faber, 1969), p.50.

discuss his seven volumes of poetry chronologically, from *Death of a Naturalist* (1966) through to *The Haw Lantern* (1987). Although other critics trace his development along biographical or historical lines, there remains a need to examine the relationships between different poems and different volumes, following each volume in the order of its appearance in an attempt to retrace some of Heaney's larger circling in his work as a whole.

The argument that Heaney progresses in a non-linear, circling pattern complicates and adds to current views on the poet, and to some extent contests them. These views tend to see and describe Heaney's achievement in linear or bi-polar terms, or to locate the critical interest in his later, more developed work. Thomas Foster, for example, parallels Heaney's poetic development from youth to "maturity" with changes in the historical and social climate in which that growth took place.[3] By contrast, Neil Corcoran's study focuses on Heaney's conflicting impulses, illuminating points of Irish socio-political and linguistic history while explaining the contribution this history makes to the poet's sense of inner division.[4] Elmer Andrews begins his work on Heaney by responding to tensions in the poet's work, and sets out to pursue the poetry "with the help of psychoanalytic vocabulary, especially as it has been developed in the light of structuralist and post-structuralist theories of discourse".[5] As Andrews' book progresses, he tends to lose his original sense of how elements of the poetry may resist each other with creative results, and the "psychoanalytic vocabulary" proves to hinder rather than to help him catch what is distinctive about Heaney's poetry. Taking a different

---

[3]*Seamus Heaney* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1989).
[4]*Seamus Heaney* (London: Faber and Faber, 1986).
[5]*Seamus Heaney: All the Realm of Whisper* (London: Macmillan, 1988), p.14.

approach, Sidney Burris, who is concerned "to elucidate one of the ways in which Heaney's poetry charts its course between what has historically been described as the conflicting demands of art and politics", considers the poetry in relation to the tradition of pastoral poetry.[6] And Ronald Tamplin argues that "The importance of the Irish context in reading Heaney's work cannot be too emphatically underlined."[7]

While I agree with each of these critics that Heaney's background plays a vital part in determining the kind of poet he is, I believe that too much dependence on "the Irish context" (both historical and biographical) may impede a richer understanding of his art. Heaney's poetry is as much an "act of union" as it is a manifestation of division, and the purpose of this study is to bring out more clearly how his passage through many stages of development has been circuitous, and is still in progress, and how his avoidance of forging towards a fixed position relates to a saving intuition that life is open-ended, and reality infinite.

Other critics have found it helpful to use Heaney's own prose commentaries and autobiographical writings[8] as a way into a discussion of his poetic processes. Andrews' short introductory chapter includes over fifty references to Heaney's observations, for example. Like Andrews, Corcoran begins his book with biographical details and Heaney's own observations; and Foster and Tamplin, too, support their evaluation of the poetry with corroborative commentary from the poet. This study, however, proceeds through Heaney's poetry more than through his willing and thoughtful participation in discussions of his work, or through his prose insights. For however valuable Heaney's own

---

[6]*The Poetry of Resistance: Seamus Heaney and the Pastoral Tradition* (Athens: Ohio Univ. Press, 1990), p.xii.
[7]*Seamus Heaney* (Milton Keynes: Open Univ. Press, 1988), p.110.
[8]In *Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1968-78* (London: Faber and Faber, 1980).

reflections are, the sway of his prose, with its metaphoric and musical richness, can impede understanding of his poetry: its very persuasiveness, instead of facilitating access, can deflect the reader's own fragile attempts to attain the state of receptive yet interrogative attention which a proper critical study demands.

An example will illustrate this point. In his prose Heaney explores the apparent conflict in his attachment to both Irish and English cultures. His essay "Belfast" (1972, *Preoccupations*) presents his private feeling of being pulled in different directions by conflicting allegiances as a reflection, and perhaps even a product, of the more public tug-of-war between opposing loyalties in "the split culture of Ulster" which shaped the society in which he was born. He sees himself as someone who grew up without the limitation (and the comfort) of a polarized world of goodies and baddies, of victims and oppressors, of Irish and English:

> One half of one's sensibility is in a cast of mind that comes from belonging to a place, an ancestry, a history, a culture, whatever one wants to call it. But consciousness and quarrels with the self are the result of what Lawrence called "the voices of my education.". . .
>
> Mossbawn lies between the villages of Castledawson and Toome. I was symbolically placed between the marks of English influence and the lure of native experience, between "the desmesne" and "the bog". (p.35.)

If we put aside reservations about the mathematical neatness ("one half") and the retrospective certainty ("symbolically") here, there is no doubt that this idea generated a range of poetry which approaches, retreats from or skirts around self-exploration and self-definition against a certain background. But there is a tendency to take Heaney's remarks as an explanation of his poetry rather than as a way into it, and if that happens their potential as a point of entry is transformed into a barrier.

The poem "Terminus", for instance, may be read as little more than an illustration of the ideas expressed in Heaney's "Belfast" essay:

When I hoked there, I would find
An acorn and a rusted bolt.

If I lifted my eyes, a factory chimney
And a dormant mountain.

If I listened, an engine shunting
And a trotting horse.

Is it any wonder when I thought
I would have second thoughts?

. . .

Two buckets were easier carried than one.
I grew up in between.[9]

The balanced antitheses of these lines almost cancel each other out, suggesting that the insight about growing up "in between" can harden into fixed interpretation, and that what once seemed challenging and mysterious can become a familiar theme, *terra cognita*. Rather than sound out a "second thought" or reach for some new discovery, the poem appears to reproduce an idea already established in Heaney's discursive mind. But if we can approach the poem openly and receptively, without being influenced by any preconceptions we have from the prose commentary, we discover that it is not mere reiteration. It actually explores the connections between Heaney's background, his nature, and his poetry, returning to test the notion that one interpretation, however true it may seem, is not the only way of understanding a formative relationship:

My left hand placed the standard iron weight.
My right tilted a last grain in the balance.

Baronies, parishes met where I was born.
When I stood on the central stepping stone

I was the last earl on horseback in midstream
Still parleying, in earshot of his peers.

---

[9]*The Haw Lantern* (London: Faber and Faber, 1987), pp.4-5.

The discovery here is that an attachment to different worlds can be enabling and enriching: the beauty of being "in between" is that it allows negotiations between the two worlds, and a new perspective can be reached by working through and around conflicting sides of an apparent impasse. This poem's "balance" is not that state of immobility which Heaney describes elsewhere as "useless equilibrium";[10] it is the poise of someone on the rim of discovery, at the point where an understanding that seemed to be crystallized is opened out to reveal something new.

However extensive Heaney's self-understanding may seem, however penetrating his grasp of his own creative processes, the poetry nevertheless withholds some of its power, even from him. This keeps him writing. For if all his tentative impulses hardened into certainties, and all antagonistic claims were reconciled, no poetry would be possible. Whatever echoes it may sound, each poem, each set of divisions, is different; as at any "terminus" or point of intersection, there are always new possibilities ahead. The reader, like the poet, needs those possibilities. No interpretation of a poet's work, however persuasive it may sound, is definitive. At best, we read (and write) literary criticism in the same spirit in which Heaney writes poetry: not to have the last word, but to take the conversation forward.

While Heaney seeks a language which will articulate his position without giving any aspect of it less than its due, this study tries to make sense of individual poems and volumes in relation to the rest of the poet's work, looking for connections and gaps, and seeking to account for the poet's returns, without imposing a pattern or distorting the shape of the achievement. This is not easily done, as it is tempting to ignore or

---

[10]"In Memoriam Francis Ledwidge," *Field Work* (London: Faber and Faber, 1979), p.60.

reconcile contradictions and to write about the poetry as if it were a seamless, unified whole. That temptation applies to any literary criticism, but it is intensified when the subject is the poetry of Seamus Heaney, because of an impulse in Heaney to reconcile his own conflicting urges. In his most consciously self-critical poems, he often berates himself for the circling movement of his mind, castigates himself for avoiding a firm choice and the responsibility attached to that choice.

The most pointed example of this occurs in "Station Island"[11], when the pilgrim-poet is confronted by the ghost of a dead relative, and accused of "confus[ing] evasion and artistic tact" in his elegy "The Strand at Lough Beg" (*Field Work*, pp.17-18). Heaney brings his cousin back to life in poetry in order to level at himself an uncompromising accusation: that he "saccharined [his cousin's] death with morning dew", when he should have written an uncompromising condemnation of his murder. How in this apparent impasse of guilt can Heaney clear a space to go forward? The poem is part of a long, circuitous sequence in which Heaney tries to find a way of expressing different allegiances to which he wants to be true, but which pull him in conflicting directions. His inner, imaginative world and the outer world in which he lives are not separate, not separable; he belongs in each, but their promptings are often at odds, so that in his attempt to be faithful to his complex experience he often finds himself swaying from one position to another. In "Station Island" he accuses himself of deficiencies and extravagances in every direction.

In another section of that poem the pilgrim meets the shade of William Carleton and is given some pragmatic advice: "try to make sense of what comes./Remember everything and keep your head" (p. 66). But it is not

---

[11]*Station Island* (London: Faber and Faber, 1984)p.83.

possible to "remember everything" without losing your head: memory is a filter which, while it enables us to retrieve significant experiences, also removes it to the shadowy recesses of the mind and thus enables us to go on with our lives. The pilgrim interprets these instructions not as Carleton intends—that he should "remember" what his options are, and remain clear-headed—but in the way that comes naturally to him, returning in memory to his own terrain, and beginning to compose a loving list of its aspects:

> 'The alders in the hedge,' I said, 'mushrooms,
> dark-clumped grass where cows or horses dunged,
> the cluck when pith-lined chestnut shells split open
>
> in your hand, . . .

The poet's way of keeping his head clear, of surviving, is to tap into experiences and sensations lodged in his imagination, in an attempt to retrieve their value. That value is not only an inner or private thing; it is knowable by others, and one thing a poem can do is remind the reader of what can be lost in the struggle to "keep your head". The pilgrim steps away from the clear-cut divisions of Carleton's world as he discovers in his own past experience more rewarding, if more elusive divisions, the kind that happen in "the cluck when pith-lined chestnut shells split open/in your hand." In that image of a "split" being also a source of potential, Heaney captures a glimpse of something he had known before, and will have to discover again.

Again and again in his poetry, Heaney returns to previous experiences in search of a way forward. Like the visitor to "The Plantation", he is drawn back into places he has been to before, but which he can only chart by re-entering:

> You had to come back
> To learn how to lose yourself,
> To be pilot and stray—witch,
> Hansel and Gretel in one.

Heaney surrenders his earlier findings in order to "learn how to lose [him]self" and see the world in a new configuration. Because his poetry is a continual process of discovery, loss and rediscovery about the nature of his attachment to his place and his people, it includes moments when he seems unable to go forward. But these moments are overcome, he does find a way forward, and what seemed to be a terminus turns out to be a pause, a held note in the overall composition of his music.

In this study I too try "to be pilot and stray" as I move forward through the volumes but gradually return and range among them, in an attempt to catch a sense of Heaney's wholeness as well as his division. While continuities and transformations emerge through the work as a whole, it is also clear that different volumes have their own particular range and tonality, and one aim of the study is to bring out the differences between volumes: to distinguish what each adds up to in itself, and ask in what ways the later volumes are denser or more sophisticated than the earlier ones, and what they may have lost. Helpful as the existing criticism is, there is still a need for a sustained study of the way in which images and ideas sway and modulate in constant motion throughout Heaney's poetry, always familiar yet always new. To see this it is necessary to surrender established vantage points and enter the poetry afresh, following its own leads. By attending carefully to the sometimes contradictory impulses in Heaney's language, I hope to experience the "cluck" when a poem opens up to reveal its seeds, and discover something new which will contribute to the ongoing attempt to understand Heaney's achievement.

The fragrance in the air is like a preparation
For new stems, for not-yet-spoken words.
The chestnuts are in bloom, and in the rusty wound
Of earth, grass is at work,stitching up the web.
Buds are gluey, and in hazel thickets
The sound of water . . .

Mieczyslaw Jastrun
"Remembrance"

## *CHAPTER ONE*

### The Given Note:
### *Death of a Naturalist* (1966) and *Door into the Dark* (1969)

Because this study is concerned not just to follow the changes in Heaney's poetry over time, but to understand how these changes came about, it is important to spend some time on his first two volumes, *Death of a Naturalist* and *Door into the Dark.* In his earliest works, Heaney faces and asks certain (or uncertain) questions that are still being asked by his latest poems, because the apparent finality of any answer turns out to be illusory. The subjects which preoccupy him here continue to do so throughout his poetry, and understandings hammered out in these early poems enable him to move on.

Heaney writes poetry in order "to see" himself ("Personal Helicon") —to discover and understand himself in relation to other people and to his own place. In these volumes he explores his own work as a poet through the practices of various people who change the form of what they do as they do it, people who, like him, have deep and entangled roots in this place, who produce their art in solitude yet who remain members of a community. Digging, painting, sculpting, thatching, shaping metal, making music—all are tested in relation to the poet's own experience of writing. He recognizes the thatcher's ability to transform the ordinary into the extraordinary, he senses that the diviner's gift of prophecy is something like the poet's, and his intuition tells him that there are close links between his work and that of the blacksmith. As he writes, however, complexities and contradictions of being both poet and member of this community emerge, and seem to confound his efforts to define the

connections between his work and theirs. He keeps returning to these comparisons, and finding that simple parallels between himself and other "makers" leave something out. What exactly is the relationship between the poet and his forefathers, or between him and others?

Pursuing these questions, in the second volume he widens the circle of his exploration beyond the well of the self, extends the "terrain" beyond the farm, as his imagination moves around the different yet connected ways in which people perceive and understand their relationships with each other and with the land that sustains them. The speaker in most of these poems is of one voice with the poet. This volume ends with a poem which attempts to explore and define the nature of Irish identity itself, in an extended image of the widening and constricting circles of that country's distinctive terrain, bogland. "Circling the terrain" is a feature of Heaney's early poetry that emerges as a central conception, image and habit of mind. Not only is his later work preoccupied with several recurrent themes (the relationships between place and art, past and present, identity and language, poetry and life), but distinctive images of circles and the circuitous recur throughout his work. Over the course of his writing the relationship between the self who explores and the self he looks into shifts; yet he needs a stable base, and in these early volumes we see him establishing the poetic foundation which will enable him later to change and grow, to break new ground. The circles he makes are the same ones he needs to break out of, and to trace Heaney's poetic achievement we need to study not only what he moves or transforms into, but what he transforms out of.

It is much more common for these early works to be read as preliminary or preparatory to Heaney's later achievement. John Wilson

Foster, for instance, appropriates Heaney's own digging metaphor as a critical tool, in this evaluation: "*Death of a Naturalist* was Heaney's preliminary and noisy spadework, the clearing of brush and scrub. . . . Between the surface clatter of *Death of a Naturalist* and the striking downwards in *Wintering Out* comes the intermediate task in *Door into the Dark* of striking inwards, recognising the inner fears to be overcome before the real digging is begun".[1] The words "surface clatter" imply that Heaney lacks hidden depths, and that in his early poetry he merely strikes objects together noisily. And to judge *Door into the Dark* as an "intermediate task" is to assume that each poem, or at least each group of poems, breaks new ground, and leaves the old ground behind. (Foster's own metaphor for the first poems is revealing—"clearing . . . brush and scrub".) In this chapter I argue that Heaney cannot leave old ground behind because of his serious attempt to find meaning in his own world, his "terrain". His returns and repetitions come out of his understanding that there is always more than one way of seeing the work and life of the artisans, their connections with the land and the people who live on it. Far from being a maker of superficial noises, Heaney is indeed like a water diviner, capable of touching undercurrents in the life around him.

## I

In his poem about "The Diviner", the title runs into the first line, implying that there is no separation between what the diviner is, and what he does:

> The Diviner
>
> Cut from the green hedge a forked hazel stick . . .

---

[1] "The Poetry of Seamus Heaney," *Critical Quaterly*, 16, No.1 (1974), 39.

But the layout of the poem causes a break after the title, so that the first line also suggests that the diviner himself is "cut from the green hedge". The country people recognize the unbroken connection between the diviner and the land, his intimacy with its soul as well as its body. They see him as one of themselves but as different from them, too.

When the diviner is called upon by the community, he has to give himself over completely to his "profession", to tune into every subtle vibration of "the terrain". This involves a kind of loosening up and tensing at the same time; and these apparently contradictory impulses do not pull him in different directions, but lead him towards a single end. The divisions between mind and body, thought and feeling, active and passive are man-made, not earth-given, and in order to make contact with the buried source, those divisions must be healed. The diviner's rod is a living "hazel stick", green with the sap that flows up through its roots, and when he holds it "tightly by the arms of the V" he is completing the circuit that unites him with the living world. The blood coursing through his veins, and the sap still in the hazel stick he holds, draw him towards hidden streams which are like arteries in the body of his mother earth.

But the curt opening word connotes division rather than unity. The diviner is "Cut"; he is "a forked . . . stick", for despite his attachment to the land he is also a man among men, needing to belong to the community just as they need his services. Cut off from them, he resembles the figure King Lear describes in his extremity on the heath: "Unaccommodated man . . . no more but such a poor, bare, forked animal . . ." (*Lear*, III, iv, ll. 102-07). The diviner's singular gift is also his plight, the medium which both ties him to the community and isolates him from it. However useful he is to his fellows, he is not one of them, for the very reason that he can

make the "cut" which they cannot. He communicates with them only through his actions: he hands them his stick "without a word", and when it lies "dead" in their hands he silently grips their wrists. While the diviner's secret isolates the spectators, it also isolates him as practitioner; sound the word "diviner" and it is very close to "divider".

Heaney is attracted by the diviner because the poet, too, responds (in words) to the subtle vibrations of the natural world. He is drawn to this subject by his own desire to connect with the secret springs of life and raise the current. But even in this early poem there is a sense of how complicated it is to be both one with men and "forked"—of the cost inherent in being called in to interpret the community's needs, of the price to be paid for knowing where the water is. "The Diviner" is more than an analogy for the way the poet is inspired. It also "divines" that Heaney is destined to "circle" his own "terrain", without recognizing how this image will become a trope in his work. Heaney's habit of circling back is also evident in his exploration of the child's vision in this volume. Nearly all the poems in the first half look back to his childhood in rural Ireland, in a continual attempt to explore the poet's connection with his own place and to retrieve something of both his sense of belonging and his singularity.

The vision of the poet, the man and the boy converge in "Death of a Naturalist". In the first ten lines the adult goes back in memory to the flax-dam "in the heart of the townland" where he grew up. He remembers that to the innocent eye of the child, the flax-dam was like a paradise.

> Bubbles gargled delicately, bluebottles
> Wove a strong gauze of sound around the smell.
> There were dragon-flies, spotted butterflies,
> But best of all was the warm thick slobber
> Of frogspawn that grew like clotted water
> In the shade of the banks.

While Heaney indulges the beauty of the scene (with words such as "delicately", "gauze", "dragonflies", "spotted butterflies", and "in the shade of the banks"), something else is rising to the surface. A form of fermentation is taking place beneath the "clotted water": the flax-dam "festered", the flax is "heavy headed" and "weighted down", it "rotted" and "sweltered in the punishing sun." The older "I" perceives that there is more going on than meets the eye, while the young child accepted the flax-dam process as natural, even beautiful.

The boy's experience forms the centre of the poem. He intercepts the life cycle of the frogs, collecting the spawn in the "spring", happily ignorant of the facts about their conception. The schoolroom lesson on frogs seems irrelevant to the real world: when the boy discovers "frogs" rather than "tadpoles" in the flax-dam, he thinks they are "invade[rs]", that they do not really belong there.

> Then one hot day when fields were rank
> With cowdung in the grass the angry frogs
> Invaded the flax-dam; I ducked through hedges
> To a coarse croaking that I had not heard
> Before.

That "coarse croaking" is their mating call and clearly it must have been sounded before the "frogspawn" was created. But the child was not ready to hear it. In playing the innocent "daddy frog" to the "flax-dam's" progeny, he has been hiding behind the safety of Miss Walls' story. He does not realize that while "wait[ing] and watch[ing]" over the gestation of the "tadpoles", unacknowledged changes have also been taking place within himself—changes that he has learned to associate with words such as "coarse", "cocked", "pulse" and "obscene", the very qualities he sees in the frogs. Suddenly, the "bass chorus" invades his consciousness; it strikes

a chord in his own nature, eliciting a base response which he had not anticipated and which he vehemently resists:

> The air was thick with a bass chorus.
> Right down the dam gross-bellied frogs were cocked
> On sods; their loose necks pulsed like sails. Some hopped:
> The slap and plop were obscene threats. Some sat
> Poised like mud grenades, their blunt heads farting.
> I sickened, turned, and ran.

The frogs embodied everything the boy thought could be put aside. They were a fact that he could not avoid, any more than he could ignore his own response. Gross and noisy, the frogs "invaded" his innocence with their "obscene threats", challenging forever his conception of nature—both the nature of the flax-dam and his own—as unsullied.

Although the last three lines of the poem are still in the first person, they are not simply the words of the child who speaks from the centre of the experience interpreting the flight as a fear of the frogs' "vengeance". We can also hear an adult voice who knows that it is himself the child runs from.

> . . . The great slime kings
> Were gathered there for vengeance and I knew
> That if I dipped my hand the spawn would clutch it.

It is as if the boy wanted to remove the episode from the fields of innocence and experience (his fear of his own sexuality) and transpose it into the realm of myth: unlike the "gross-bellied frogs" who sat "Poised like mud grenades, their blunt heads farting", the "great slime kings" seem to be lifted from the world of fairy tale. The young "naturalist" tries to contain the unmanageable by treating the experience as if it were a specimen that could be examined, understood and brought to order. The adult returns to such moments, to the realization that life is always enticingly just beyond our grasp, resisting all attempts to be contained and pinned down. However "natural" the desire to understand and explain

the mysterious, it is resisted by a desire to preserve the mysterious and inexplicable elements of experience.

The "death of a naturalist" is an enabling discovery, and throughout his first volume, as Heaney continually comes back to capture or understand particular moments or experiences, he finds himself encountering questions rather than answers. He discovers that each little change which his younger self had to accommodate, each experience he had to confront, involves a small "death", and that he became a poet, as he became a man, not at any particular moment but through a process of experiences in which one way of seeing gradually gave way to another. In giving the title *Death of a Naturalist* to the volume, Heaney acknowledges his constant returning to such small deaths as at the heart of his concern: these "deaths" have a cumulative effect, as the adult, looking back, sees that each small loss is also a small gain which takes him forward in his life. Yet such losses are no preparation for the fact of real death. In "Mid-Term Break" Heaney recalls the death of his young brother, an event which "breaks" into his "term" and marks a gap or break in the continuum of his life, a break that the poet tries to recapture, and to heal.

The poem opens with the speaker isolated "in the college sick bay", where, waiting to be taken home, he has time out to contemplate how death breaks in while the cycle of life continues to revolve all around him. He cannot contemplate, however; he is numb, not knowing what he feels or what he is supposed to feel. He has been sent for, called back into the family, but even in his own home he is unable to respond. When old men offer their condolences he cannot understand why they are not "embarrassed" to be still alive when the young child is dead. Their traditional expressions of regret sound to him like empty formulae:

> The baby cooed and laughed and rocked the pram
> When I came in, and I was embarrassed
> By old men standing up to shake my hand
>
> And tell me they were 'sorry for my trouble'. . .

The old men act and speak as they always have done at wakes and funerals, but the boy feels cut off from them. He is the child who was always out on his own, peering down wells and into barns, observing the processes of life on the farm; and in being separate he has somehow failed to make a connection with people, has missed something of what is expected of him. Next morning when, alone, he sees his brother "for the first time in six weeks", sees him changed and stilled, he remains somewhat detached, responding as a "naturalist", clear and observant:

> Paler now,
>
> Wearing a poppy bruise on his left temple,
> He lay in the four foot box as in his cot.
> No gaudy scars, the bumper knocked him clear.
>
> A four foot box, a foot for every year.

Just as the boy holds in his own feelings, in order to keep the unmanageable fact of death under control, so he tries to contain the meaning of the experience in the "four foot box". As he measures out the coffin and the years, the correspondence seems to have some significance. But what could it signify, since the experience is beyond measurement?

"Mid-term break" is an attempt to make something of the "blow" that knocked the child clear of this life. As a child, Heaney was not there for the blow and could not absorb what had happened, and his adult response in the poem is as restrained as his response was at the time. He can only state the episode as it appeared to him, and the poem transfixes the family as they were then, stopped by that moment: the father driven out of the house by his grief, the mother's emotions "stanched", and his own

wooden failure to reach out to either of them. Heaney would like to find a way to stanch with his pen the wound of his unresponsiveness, but although he has moved on since then he still cannot understand this "mid-term break". The only way the poet can find to redress his failure at the time to be one with his people, to comfort them and thus find comfort himself, is to expose it in a poem. He comes back to the experience, but in another sense he cannot re-enter the world he is cut off from; he remains on the circumference, imaginatively immobilized at a point beyond his own people, beyond the world at school—alone. This detachment is explored further in "Personal Helicon". It begins, "As a child, they could not keep me from wells", and the heart of the poem relishes and endorses this fascination:

> I loved the dark drop, the trapped sky, the smells
> Of waterweed, fungus and dank moss.

Heaney presents himself drawn, as if by his nature, to the dark and damp and mysterious aspects of his world. Before he began to think of himself as a poet, he "grew up in between" the lures of danger and safety in a less conscious way than his "Belfast" essay attempts to define. That danger accounts for much of the attraction. Always alone, he stares into the wells, sometimes sounding their depths by dropping down the bucket, for the frisson of being momentarily touched by the mysteries of life and death.

> I savoured the rich crash when a bucket
> Plummeted down at the end of a rope.

The child is hooked; and the poem accumulates a number of instances that convey his fascination. When he peered down wells, he became enthralled by the darkness; one was "So deep you saw no reflection in it", and when he did see his own reflection in the "shallow" well, "A white

face hovered over the bottom", strange and unrecognizable, the movement in "hovered" suggesting the ghost of a drowned person. The mysterious attraction of another well became "scaresome", when "out of ferns and tall/Foxgloves, a rat slapped across [his] reflection"; the blow is almost palpable.

The poem conveys the wholehearted involvement of a child who is interested in losing himself down these wells of darkness, rather than in receiving a familiar impression. His self-absorption is so complete that the reference to Narcissus in the final stanza comes as a surprise.

> Now, to pry into roots, to finger slime,
> To stare big-eyed Narcissus, into some spring
> Is beneath all adult dignity.

Both the poet and the reader are familiar with the story of Narcissus who was so enamoured of his own reflection that he pined away, destined never to know any more than his reflection could impart. The introduction of "big-eyed Narcissus" to the poem casts a different light on the boy's pursuits, as if to make them appear self-regarding. Yet it is the poet who accuses himself of Narcissus' self-entrancement. So intent is he to "pry into roots", to "finger slime" and to understand (at one remove) the explorations of his earlier self that "now" he cannot "keep [himself] from" regarding the special properties of the child as those of the potential poet. This is a subject he returns to throughout his work.

The title of the poem, "Personal Helicon", recalls a myth: anyone who drank from the springs of Mt Helicon received the gift of poetry. But Heaney did not become a poet simply by "star[ing] . . . into some spring" of his own. The wells he found irresistible were not clear springs, they were sunk "deep" into the earth, or "fructified" and stank of "waterweed, fungus and dank moss". He divined the places that answered his own

needs, both as child and poet, in the wish that his poetry would enable him to "see [him]self"—to find the connection between the man he is and the child he had been. He "rhymes" into "wells" hoping to "set the darkness echoing": to hear "[his] own call" echoed back to him "With a clean new music in it."

II

Heaney haunts his own early life in these poems; he gives himself over to memories—the sounds and the feel of life on the farm—as he keeps coming back to a fundamental question: what does it mean to be a poet and also a member of a community? How is his relationship with his "terrain" like, and unlike, that of his forefathers, or the water-diviner, the thatcher or the blacksmith? The persistence with which he returns to this question, never settling for an easy or partial answer, looks forward to the openness of his future explorations in his poetry. At his best, his refusal of a fixed or singular perspective creates poems seeded with possibility, poems to which a reader can return again and again; at his less than best, this inclination to take in everything comes close to a desire to consume life for his own artistic purposes—but this tendency itself is also part of the poetry's explorations. In these early poems, as he searches for a metaphor which will embrace his experience of separateness yet belonging, he continually finds that built into any metaphor is a division or split which may be bridged but which does not close. In "Digging", for example, the differences between the poet's relationship with "the terrain" and that of his forefathers are as important as the similarities.

On a primary level, "Digging" is an attempt to keep the line between the poet and his forefathers open. The poet, like the diviner, wants the

current to flow, but fears that he is a "bystander", that the rod may fall dead in his grasp. The poem establishes how the poet's pen will be like his father's and grandfather's spade, a means of preparing the ground for new growth and of unearthing treasure. And the poem is a tribute to these hardworking men, for whom digging was not merely a livelihood but a skill, a source of satisfaction and pride. On another level, as well as commemorating these people and celebrating their skill, the poem attempts to recapture the magic of digging. Heaney may be looking at his father, but his eye is on poetry, his higher purpose: he is upstairs, writing, "look[ing] down" on his father "bend[ing] low". The poet is enjoying the feel of "The coarse boot nestled on the lug" in his imagination more than he would in actuality (if he went down and gave his father a hand). By the end of the poem the reader realizes that he has had poetry in mind all along, and that the father and grandfather are depicted not merely for their own sake but in order to shape the metaphor he has been working towards. For that "neat" ending does not come out of any discovery in the poem: the poet had it in mind to use "digging" as a metaphor before he started, and this determined the shape of the poem.

In this poem Heaney raises the same question implicit in the last line of "Personal Helicon": does he rhyme "to see [him]self", or "to set the darkness echoing"? With his two hands on the spade, the digging man, like the diviner, is earthed to the land which sustains him. But the poet recognizes that he has grown away from that immediate connection with the terrain, and "the curt cuts of an edge" which he feels in breaking up the earth with his pen are not the same as the physical "cuts" (in either direction) felt by his father and grandfather. He realizes that "digging" involves at least as much graft as craft, and finds that the hard physical

labour refuses to be pushed out of the language in the interests of a useful analogy. The metaphor turns out to be less satisactory than it first appeared, and Heaney looks for more fruitful analogies in the work of other artists. For example, he considers the achievement of the painter Colin Middleton in the poem "In Small Townlands".

Middleton, like Heaney, looks to his own "terrain" as a source of his art. His sense of belonging, his attachment to his own place, enables him to "contract" landscape into art; but it ultimately "outcrops" the containment. In Middleton's "thick lenses" there is a suggestion of tunnel vision, of the artist's curious ability to contract "outcrops of stone" to a space between the man and the land which can only be filled by the work of art itself. The effort to take hold of the landscape under his lenses involves both making divisions and establishing an underlying coherence. Because he knows this land so intimately, his "hogshair wedge" can "split the granite from the clay", can "bare" the "crystal in the rock", and "hone an edge/On mountain blue and heather grey". The poem presents the internalized landscape as if it were a volcano, the artist's brush and imagination working together until the volcano erupts and "A new world cools out of his head". And the new creation involves a change in the artist, because he puts that piece of himself into the painting. Heaney admires the painter as a creator: he does not simply capture something of the landscape, or something of himself, but through the fusion of the two something new and different cools out of his head. The poem celebrates the fact that the new configuration replaces the old: afterwards, the landscape never looks quite the same. "In Small Townlands", then, is more than a tribute to Colin Middleton's achievement. It conveys something of the split between the artist's

attachment to his place as it is, and his need—even greed—to refashion it after his imagination, and in that it bears directly on Heaney's explorations into the nature of his own art. But the painter's work differs essentially from the poet's, whose material is language—language is an invention of people. Pursuing this connection, Heaney turns to another writer, John Millington Synge, whose attempt to articulate how the landscape of Aran was expressed in the language of its people seems closer to his own enterprise as a poet.

"Pare[d] down" by the cutting Atlantic winds, the Aran islands are Ireland's most barren "ground", but they proved fertile for Synge, who found in the life there the medium he had been looking for to express his sense of a distinctly Irish mentality and culture. Unlike Middleton, Synge does not rediscover his native terrain in his art; he visited the islands expecting to find something in common with these people, being Irish; but he found that, for all they share with him, they remain essentially different; their life has shaped them, just as his own has shaped him. While he made several visits to Aran, and endured the stark and harsh conditions of life there, he could not become one with the people. In "Synge on Aran", Heaney suggests that although Synge earned the right to be called a man of Aran, he never really was one: he transcribed their life, while remaining an outsider. And in exploring this combination of solitude and solidarity in Synge's experience, Heaney is once again exploring his own mixed feelings on the subject.

Although Synge was an outsider on Aran, he seemed to be cut out for the place, as if his purpose in life was to write this culture into being. Heaney's words, "Islanders too/are for sculpting", suggest that the islanders, too, existed for Synge's purposes, and the poem investigates this

mysterious appropriateness. The sculpting metaphor works in two directions:

> Salt off the sea whets
> the blades of four winds.
> They peel acres
> of locked rock, pare down
> a rind of shrivelled ground . . .

Just as Synge desired to "carve" a contemporary culture out of the grim tale of Aran, so Heaney's language conveys the severity of the playwright's task. The poem is pared down and sculpted itself, its flinty consonants and short lines suggesting the force and hardship of Synge's discipline.

Heaney celebrates Synge's achievement in its own terms: the playwright did not render directly the islanders' dialect, but transcribed the essential idiom and modulated it after English literary traditions. While "sculpting" and "par[ing] down" suggest how landscape has become a symbol for the people, the metaphors also lay bare real people's lives. "Sculpting" is very close in sound to scalping, an aural association which gains force by the word "scalp" also meaning a bare rock projecting above the water. From the moment the winds cast Synge upon Aran's "rind of shrivelled ground" until his own "polished head" was "full of drownings", a question about drawing the people's experience out of them (divining the source of their histories) hovers over the poem. In his own writing Heaney, like Synge, runs the risk of stylizing and thus oversimplifying the figures he describes, reducing their significance as individuals and as a people even as he gives their life a literary value.

Synge's own account of his time on the Aran islands reveals how, despite his attachment to the people, he felt like an outsider, doubly alienated by his feeling as an artist. But it also reveals the detachment of the anthropologist, or even the "naturalist":

> In some ways these men and women seem strangely far away from me. They have the same emotions that I have, and the animals have, yet I cannot talk to them when there is much to say, more than to the dog that whines beside me in a mountain fog. There is hardly an hour I am with them that I do not feel the shock of some inconceivable idea, and then again the shock of some vague emotion that is familiar to them and to me. On some days I feel this island as a perfect home and resting place; on other days I feel that I am a waif among the people. I can feel more with them than they can feel with me, and while I wander among them, they like me sometimes, and laugh at me sometimes, yet never know what I am doing.[2]

Perhaps the irreducible gap between Synge and the people he studies is related to the writer's assumption that he knows "what [he is] doing", while they do not. While the Aran fisherfolk cannot write about their hard and elemental life because they are engrossed in it, an outsider's interpretation will be shaped by the traditions he comes from as well as those of where he now stands. Would it have been possible, or advisable, for Synge to surrender himself completely to the atmosphere and the people, and become part of their life? He needed the stony resistance of the place and people: in order to write about them he had to maintain a detachment from them. As Heaney's poem shows, if Synge was the sculptor, the task he was set upon meant that he too was sculpted upon.

> . . . There
> he comes now, a hard pen
> scraping in his head . . .

The exposure of the writer and the landscape are linked: the aim of the artist is to reveal what is essentially there, whether the artist is Nature, or Synge, or Heaney. To achieve this aim it is necessary to enter into the life of the place and render it as truthfully as the "hard pen" of the artist's purpose will allow; but even the strongest feeling of belonging and attachment is resisted by the artist's isolation. Heaney admires and celebrates Synge's intertwining of English and Irish cultures, his fusion of

---

[2]"The Aran Islands II", *Collected Works*, Vol. 2, ed. R. Skelton (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1962), p.113.

his own experiences and those of his subjects, to create a whole new world, written with

> the nib filed on a salt wind
> and dipped in the keening sea.

Yet Synge's challenge and achievement are essentially distinct from Heaney's, because the poet's relationship with his own terrain differs essentially from that of the playwright on Aran. An entry in Synge's notebook, written near the end of his first visit to Aran, points to their difference:

> I cannot yet judge these strange primitive natures closely enough to divine them. I feel only what they are. . . . How much of Ireland was formerly like this, and how much of Ireland is today Anglicized and civilized and brutalized?[3]

Heaney is not fired by a missionary zeal; he feels estranged among his own people. And in *Door into the Dark* we see him turning again to the local details of his own "terrain", doubling back to test his own way of "making" in the light of what is often taken for granted. The familiar world of the "Thatcher", for example, is explored not simply to capture an aspect of rural Irish life before it disappeared, but in order to discover what light it might shed on the way in which feelings of belonging and of separateness can sit uncomfortably in the human breast. Heaney knows that thatching is simply roofing; even the word "thatch" has no metaphoric resonance, no etymological magic. The poem admires the thatcher's skill and the unselfconscious way he goes about his work, as well as the magic of the finished event.

> Couchant for days on sods above the rafters
> He shaved and flushed the butts, stitched all together
> Into a sloped honeycomb, a stubble patch,
> And left them gaping at his Midas touch.

---

[3]Quoted in David H. Greene and Edward M Stephens, *J.M. Synge: 1871-1909*, rev. ed. (New York: New York Univ. Press, 1989), p.95.

One of the secrets the thatcher appears to share with the diviner is that, although he may be "Bespoke for weeks", he comes when he is ready; he seems to possess a freedom that the poet admires and even envies, the freedom of being his own man. How does he do it? Heaney hopes that by watching the process attentively he will learn—not how to thatch, but the thatcher's secret. There is a trick to being your own man; with the diviner it is his knowledge of the earth's secret sources, with the thatcher it is his ability to measure and cut the thatch exactly right, looking as if he is doing nothing extraordinary and then producing a miracle.

Yet however arbitrary his "turn[ing] up" may appear, the thatcher knows that he must spend his life this way, going over the same ground. He is isolated by the very material he works with: perched "for days" alone on the roof, he never knows or is part of what goes on inside the house. In one sense, the world he "pin[s] down" is the world beneath the eaves; in another, his world as a thatcher is slowly diminishing, so that soon his skills will no longer be needed. Just like the poet, he needs a community (with roofs to clad), but in a way his competence, his independence, cuts him off from that community: he leaves them "gaping" at his prowess, speechless. They cannot conceal their wonder, their mouths falling open as if to indicate the gaping space that separates him from them. Why is he like Midas? Because he keeps applying his golden touch, even though its effect is to cut him off from people, the true wealth that surrounds him. In making a seamless thatch which keeps out the elements, the thatcher also makes himself impervious to any entry.

That apparently seamless thatch, with no visible fault line and no discernible beginning or end, resembles a completed poem. Neil Corcoran (pp. 45-46) compares "Digging" with "Thoughtfox" by Ted Hughes, but I

think this comparison applies more fruitfully to "Thatcher". As Corcoran notes, the last stanza of "Digging" has "a strain of overdetermination" about it (p. 52), whereas the finished "thatch", like a completed poem, is suddenly written onto the scenery and onto the page. The poem "Thatcher", too, has the element of its own completeness in it: Heaney's diviner does not find water—we know he is successful only because the rod falls dead in the hands of others—but this poem captures something of the thatcher's magic. The poet does not fully understand the thatcher, but (having something of the diviner's gift) he taps into the man up on the roof working his own Rumplestiltskin magic as if it were nothing out of the ordinary. While the diviner twitches with expectation—goes "witching for water", as Thomas Foster puts it (p.17)—the common magic of the thatcher goes virtually unnoticed. Even the thatcher himself does not pretend that there is any mystery to what he does, but his preparations are a sort of divination; and what is divination, but seeing in the mind's eye what something will look like in the future? The achievement of the poem is that it does not "pin down" the thatcher's world, that it leaves the magic in, without taking the ordinariness away.

Yet there is more to Heaney's fascination with the thatcher than what Dick Davis calls the "glamour of the maker which we feel the young poet anxious to emulate. If he will dig with his pen . . . he will also forge, twist, sharpen and stitch".[4] The poet does "twist, sharpen and stitch" with his pen, but however he celebrates the thatcher's skill, it remains different from his own, parallel rather than continuous with it. He moves around this similarity yet dissimilarity uneasily, searching for a way forward; what he needs to change his understanding can only be found by relating

---

[4]Dick Davis, "Door into the Dark," in *The Art of Seamus Heaney*, ed. Tony Curtis (Bridgend: Poetry Wales Press, 1985), p.33.

the dark areas of himself to what he knows of the world outside. "All I know is a door into the dark", begins "The Forge", a poem which tests Heaney's intuition that if he could get to the "centre" of the blacksmith's art, he could understand his own. After all, his own poetic processes have much in common with the blacksmith, who knows when and how to hit, each tap slightly different, according to his feeling for the shape, and depending on how the last blow went. Heaney understands that in some way the blacksmith's work is *not* like writing, but he wants to go beyond the parallels to establish a deeper connection.

In trying to define what is distinctive about these "makers" Heaney is trying to find what is distinctive about his own makings; but his pursuit of these questions is itself distinctive. Blake Morrison says that "Heaney's strong, silent tradesmen . . . sanction his craft",[5] and Neil Corcoran describes these poems as "analogy poems" (p.55). Both critics have a point, but taking their ideas a little further, I suggest that the comparisons between the poet's work and the artisans' are more like metaphors than "sanctions" or "analogies"; for though the craft and technique of Heaney's subjects seem to be penetrable, something of these people remains a mystery, impervious to the "hard pen" of the poet. Corcoran also sees "the proper relationship between this poet and his own first community" as "an issue at the root of a large number of . . . poems" (p.52). But it is not clear what exactly he considers this "proper relationship" between Heaney and his community to consist in. The thatcher's world certainly seems very familiar to the poet, but when he tries to catch the thatcher's trick of divination, it remains elusive. He cannot explain the thatcher's miracle because when it is accomplished the poet finds himself, like the other

---

[5]Blake Morrison, *Seamus Heaney* (London: Methuen, 1982), p.31.

bystanders, "gaping" with wonder. And when he stands outside the door of the forge, he imagines the blacksmith within as a man who has been initiated into a secret order, but who in another way could never know the mystery of what he does. It is because these craftsmen seem "unfussed" by their work, as if it simply comes naturally to them, that their mystery remains intact for the poet, who retains the child's ability to respond directly to experience. While part of him wants to tap the source of these skills, another part of him wants them to preserve their mystery, and I think it is in his refusal to flatten out or simplify this mixed response that his "proper relationship" to the community is maintained.

The speaker in his poem "The Forge" stands at the door, but what happens inside remains beyond his ken. And the blacksmith cannot come out of his world (the forge); he is immobilized by the gap between his own time and that of the world outside. He can "lean out on the jamb", the poet can somehow "lean" in from the world of the "traffic . . . flashing in rows" and they can glean a little of each other's world. But the "centre" of the smith's world remains a mystery.

At that centre, the poet speculates, "must be" the anvil. The description "Horned like a unicorn" suggests that he has never actually seen an anvil; its horn is more unlike than like depictions of the legendary beast's horn. The poem implies that he has never been inside the forge, where he imagines the anvil is "Set there immoveable", as if it draws on the earth's core. It is "an altar" over which the smith "expends himself", and the verb suggests something of the cost of living that life, of working that forge. The smith does not consume life to make something new, he uses himself up, puts something of himself into whatever he gives his shape

to. He *spends* his life in that way, taking a blob of metal and shaping it into something that has a practical application.

Heaney sets this forge in a city laneway, in sight of the "traffic . . . flashing in rows", to emphasize by contrast the close link between the smith and the natural world. Alone in his dark forge, the blacksmith's heart beats with the heart of the horse as he stills it in order to shoe it. The smith himself is like an uncast man, unable to make out his own shape in the world of people beyond his door. After his breather he "grunts and goes in, with a slam and flick", slamming the door on them as well as on Heaney's hungry imagination.

While the voices of Heaney's education tell him something of how this Promethean figure was venerated for centuries as an alchemist, a magician, the poet cannot capture that magic in the actual forge. Corcoran notes a difference between this poem and the other "analogy" poems, claiming that here the excitement "has congealed" (p.56) and that "the poem is too snug a fit for its own metaphor, nothing remains inchoate and unreconciled; and the whole thing seems glazed with self-satisfaction" (p.63). This criticism implies a merely strategic use of analogy, as if, having found a pattern for his poetry Heaney has begun to employ it endlessly, to create "facile opposition[s]" for their own sake. But Heaney's return to explore the nature of his art through the blacksmith is not facile, though it is frustrated: when he tries to imagine the reality of what goes on in the forge, he finds the whole thing unmalleable, hard for even him to shape, because his ideas about the smith have come from literature rather than from life. While I agree that the metaphor "has congealed" here (though I would say "hardened"), I believe that is not because Heaney is simply applying a formula, but because he comes up against the

fact that an analogy will not always provide a way forward. Like Stephen Dedalus, Heaney wants to create, "to forge in the smithy of [his] soul", an enduring art out of the common experience of life. But the actual smithy is not in Heaney's soul: the basis of this poem is myth rather than lived experience. It is worth asking why the myth of the blacksmith endured so long. One explanation is that he challenged mother earth herself, speeding up her naturally slow process of gestation by applying fire to ores and metals. Heaney, however, does not want to challenge nature; he wants to work with and through the natural world. The alchemy he seeks is the transmutation of the base metal of his everyday experience into the "gold" of insight.

III

As a child, Heaney was attracted to aspects of his world that others might find uninviting; his inclination to haunt wells gave him entrance to an order of his own. As a poet, too, he is attracted to things beyond his grasp. Heaney has become an apprentice of artisans whose specialized and unchanging vocation has been to remake the world, and has realized the connections that emerge between child and poet. And he sees that women, too, are makers, engaged in transforming their world and in bringing forth new life. Some of these early poems approach women as a way through the door of the mysterious, and Heaney writes about them in the same way as he writes of the thatcher and the blacksmith, trying to discover the "centre" of their lives. But the women in Heaney's life are more than makers: they are people with whom he shares the bond of common experience. He tries to plumb the secret of women's experience, sensing that their personal strength holds together the world of his

childhood in rural Ireland. But he finds that women's mystery, too, remains out of bounds to him, because his understanding of them is limited to his knowledge of the roles they play: "The Wife", "Mother".

In these early volumes, when he tries to imagine what it would be like to be a woman, his attempts seem to be hampered by clichés, the talk of women in kitchens, about women at school, observations on women in pubs and on the farm where there seems to be a consensus on the subject—everyone trying to understand the mystery of women, but in the process actually diminishing it. The farm workers in the poem "The Wife's Tale" are presented accepting the woman's offering as their due.

> When I had spread it all on linen cloth
> Under the hedge, I called them over.
> . . .
> He lay down and said 'Give these fellows theirs.
> I'm in no hurry,' plucking grass in handfuls
> And tossing it in the air.
> . . . .
> He winked, then watched me as I poured a cup
> And buttered the thick slices that he likes.

Elmer Andrews remarks that this poem's form is appropriate for the woman's situation, adding that

> Heaney's probing of the relationship between the sexes discloses in intimate detail the way the woman's life is determined by the man; and the revelation of her sensitive awareness co-existing with acceptance of her condition, without protest, without rancour, is no small triumph of intuition and finesse. (p.44)

I would argue that the tone of the poem shows no "probing of the relationship". The poem records Heaney's impression of the woman's compliance, but what she resents is not that her actions are "determined by the man" so much as the fact that the annual "inspection" of the "seed" is meaningless: the way of distinguishing "good clean seed" from bad has never been disclosed to her.

> Always this inspection has to be made
> Even when I don't know what to look for.

But as Heaney sees it, through the lenses of his religious education, neither the man nor the woman "determined" their roles for themselves. These roles have been inherited from time immemorial: the Book of Genesis records that while Adam was fashioned from dust—born of the Earth—he was told (and seems to have believed) that he gave birth to Eve! Ever since then the man has continually maintained his superiority over "the cutletsized consort", as James Joyce describes her.[6] In Milton's version of the story, *Paradise Lost*, God does not warn Eve about the malicious enemy who seeks her ruin: she hears of it only indirectly, "from the parting angel overheard/As in a shady nook [she ] stood behind", and then from Adam.[7] And the serpent's argument, which she finds irresistible, is that if she eats the forbidden fruit she will be party to all she has been excluded from: "in the day/Ye eat thereof, your eyes that seem so clear,/Yet are but dim, shall perfectly be then/Opened and cleared, and ye shall be as gods,/Knowing both good and evil as they know."(Book IX, ll.705-09, p.480). Just as Milton imagined Eve's innocence in terms of her exclusion from the mens' talk, so Heaney writes of a wife who does not wonder, but accepts the fact that ignorance is her lot.

In "The Wife's Tale", the lives of both husband and wife are bounded by the farm, but in his world "seed" is "hard as shot" and forks stuck in the ground are like "javelins" on "battlefields"; in the woman's world, forks are for farming and seed is for bread. She tolerates the man's wink, complies with his "Away over there and look" to pacify him. And the poet sympathizes with her. But is she simply accepting her husband's dominion over her? Holding the centre is worth more to her than

---

[6]*Finnegans Wake* (New York: The Viking Press, 1939), p.255.
[7]Book IX, ll.275-8, ed. Alistair Fowler (London: Longmans, 1971), p.453.

voicing her annoyance; she is tolerant because she believes that bringing peace is more important than making war.

"The Wife's Tale" seems to be set in Heaney's childhood—in the 1940s or 50s—and based on his boyhood impression of the relationship between the sexes on the farm. But the sympathy and admiration for the woman's long-suffering stoicism suggest that the poet has not yet probed or sounded those youthful impressions. The poem accepts (as Andrews does) that women's lives were "determined by men", at least in those days before their consciousness expanded. But what we see (in the outward show of the relations beween people) is "determined" by the structures and beliefs and attitudes of our own society. Similarly, our interpretation of a poem is shaped by the assumptions we bring to the reading. While it is possible to see the woman in this poem as living a half-life, constrained by man's rules and expectations, she can be seen from a different perspective as someone in touch with something deep and strong, different from her husband but not to be pitied for that. It could be that the poem records not the last days of women's oppression, but the last days of an endangered species, of women who see a larger world, who focus not on the space between man and woman but on the delicately-wrought lines that link and separate them. The woman is the centre of the man's consciousness in that world (which, despite popular belief, has not entirely vanished).

Heaney returns to the mystery of women's otherness throughout the volume, approaching it from different angles in "Undine", for instance, in his "Elegy for a Still-born Child", and in a poem simply called "Mother". In "Mother" he imagines the feeling of exhaustion of a pregnant woman, locked into a cycle of feeding, labour, and feeding, a life

that appears to be all giving, no taking. Ostensibly the poem is an expression of sympathy for and understanding of her as she goes about her work on the farm with the weight of man's oppression literally dragging her down. Yet Heaney conveys not understanding but the lack of it when he puts words into her mouth to describe her unborn child as a "plunger", "like a young calf/Gone wild on a rope", or has her speak of "This gulp in my well". It is not his intention to say that she is a poor cow, but his subject does seem closer to a cow in calf than to a woman. The farm boy, the naturalist, observed the cows and the old bedhead used as a makeshift fence and the women walking about heavily, and made what sense he could of what he saw. Now, as a man, he is still trying to understand woman through non-human nature, rather than as a complex human being, different from yet also like himself. He reduces her reality to her function, and as a result he presents her, not as an individual, but as producer or reproducer. The critic who claims that "she is the Earth Mother, and she finds joy in the winds that blow her skirts about her thighs and 'stuff air down [her] throat' "[8] is, like Heaney, substituting a myth for a human being.

The man who can celebrate the thatcher's art and share the diviner's intuition wants to be sensitive to women's experiences, but does not attend closely to the qualities of women that make them distinctive as people. While Heaney can accept that the thatcher's secret will not be his, and even rejoice in the way it escapes attempts to pin it down in poetry, he is not content to leave the women's mystery to them. Just as he tries to tap into the blacksmith's secret, without allowing him any real,

---

[8]Carlanda Green, "The Feminine Principle in Seamus Heaney's Poetry," in *Seamus Heaney*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House,1986), p.145.

individual existence, so he stands at the women's door, trying to "forge" a way into their mystery.

It is not hard to imagine where Heaney found this idea of the heavy burden of being a woman: in his careful listening he would have heard it uttered in the words of women themselves, in idle chat and in gossip, in sayings and jokes, and in literary references that go back as far as Genesis, back to the expulsion of Eve from paradise:

> Unto the woman he said, I will greatly multiply thy sorrow and thy conception; in sorrow shalt thou bring forth children; and thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee. (Genesis 4:16)

Heaney's cultural and linguistic heritage informs him that woman was created to meet man's needs (a helpmate) and childbirth the "labour" for which she was designed. But he has also heard about woman's intuition, of her wiles and her spells, and of her bounty, like that of nature. He tries to enter the world of women from what has been said about anonymous Woman, not from what he has discovered and understood though the personal identities of individual women. And rather than reach out into the female experience,Heaney tries to incorporate it into himself and into the nature of things, assuming this to be the same thing. In these poems he does not succeed in his aim, and recognizing this he returns to the subject in later poems (particularly in *Field Work*). At this stage of his development, however, his attempts to explore and allow a distinctive otherness are more successful when he writes not about female people but about female eels in "A Lough Neagh Sequence". Here he admits his fascination and unease without feeling that these have to be mastered or even understood, and calls up the mystery of the eels from the depths of his own imagination and fear. For example, the way he writes of the

pregnant woman contrasts with his imagining of the timeless "Return" the female eel makes to lay her eggs:

> Her stomach
> shrunk, she exhilarates
> in mid-water. Its throbbing
> is speed through days and weeks.
>
> Who knows now if she knows
> her depth or direction;
> she's passed Malin and
> Tory, silent, wakeless,
> a wisp, a wick that is
> its own taper and light
> through the weltering dark.
> Where she's lost once she lays
> ten thousand feet down in
> her origins. The current
> carries slicks of orphaned spawn.

The whole "Lough Neagh Sequence" pursues the dark "undulations" of the eels, from their journey "Beyond Sargasso" to the shores of the Irish lough, where they become "hatched fears", "cable[s] flexed in the grass". The extraordinary power of the eels has worked on the human imagination since "the lough first spawned", the beginning of time, and Heaney's poem sequence responds to the eels' "insinuating pull" which is beyond rational comprehension: he gives it the freedom to return and "describe [its] arcs" in his words.

When Heaney writes of the eels, he is in an element more comfortable to him than the world of human sexual relations and differences. Nature is much larger, much older, than man (or woman), and Heaney finds it easier to write about dark depths when they are not simply human ones. Clay is in the human soul, and in his early poems Heaney finds it easier to touch the clay rather than individual people, particularly female ones. In "Bogland" he explores the spirit of the place in the hope of touching the soul of the people. From the first word it is clear that the poet is not merely concerned with the artist's response to nature: "We have no

prairies", like "Our pioneers", indicates a sense of community that informs the poem. The unbounding and "bottomless" bog is primordial, older than man; it fascinates the poet, but ultimately it cannot be known.

Heaney is attracted by the mythic status of the bogland, and the relationship of this myth to Ireland's history. As a boy, he tells us, he was warned to keep away from the bog because he might fall in (*Preoccupations*, p.56), and it retains for him something of the treacherous and mysterious which keeps drawing him back, just as he could not be kept away from wells when he was a child. The poem suggests how the bog, the land of Ireland, exerts a dangerously seductive pull not only on the poet but on all its people.

> Everywhere the eye concedes to
> Encroaching horizon,
>
> Is wooed into the cyclops' eye
> Of a tarn.

Its hidden depths have endless riches for the "pioneers", the "diggers" like himself, who "keep striking/Inwards and downwards" rather than outwards in a linear direction. Though it looks like firm land, it is never more than superficially hardened.

> . . . Our unfenced country
> Is bog that keeps crusting
> Between the sights of the sun.

The words "the sights of the sun" suggest the steady pace of nature's rhythms, fixed by forces beyond human control. But they also recall the sights of a gun, as if the story of "our country" is a story of continual wounding, as if the "crusting" were the land healing, only to be cracked open again. Heaney returns to explore this idea and imagery in his next volume, *Wintering Out*.

In personifying the bog ("The ground itself is kind"), "Bogland" is tapping into deep-sunk beliefs in earth as the mother, the nurturer of mankind. But the bog is noted less for the new life it brings forth than for its storage capacities.

> They've taken the skeleton
> Of the Great Irish Elk
> Out of the peat, set it up
> An astounding crate full of air.

With the shift from "We" to "They", it is as if the speaker wants to dissociate himself from attempts to retrieve the bog's treasures. When "the Great Irish Elk" was removed from the vault of the earth it left the realm of imagination and entered the realm of fact. In the course of its removal everything that had held it together fell away, so that what was recovered, a "crate full of air", fell far short of what was lost. Some things, the poem implies, may be better left buried—even if they appear to be intact and fresh:

> Butter sunk under
> More than a hundred years
> Was recovered salty and white.

Miraculous as that is, there is a sense that century-old butter ought not, in the nature of things, to be "salty and white". (Would the farmer want his wife to spread this butter on his bread?) Entwined with the poem's marvel at the bog's preservative capacity is a mistrust of keeping things beyond their due date.

Yet even for the reader it is difficult to withstand the seductive pull of the language here, to resist and retain some sharpness and definition in the way the buried butter does.

> The ground itself is kind, black butter
>
> Melting and opening underfoot,
> Missing its last definition
> By millions of years.

It is easy for any explorer to lose his or her footing when "striking/ Inwards and downwards" in search of the essential Irish identity, and this danger and uncertainty appeal to Heaney, the man who as a child hung about wells. As long as people fear that they might be swallowed up by the bog, they will keep a respectful distance rather than try to capture its secret. Heaney writes of the retentive bogland, and all it stands for, in a circuitous attempt to render it accessible while at the same time keeping it dark and strange, a place whose depths can never be fully plumbed and where nothing will ever crystallize and harden into certainty: "They'll never dig coal here". A land, an identity, or a history that resists "definition" is a "bottomless" source of possibilities, for the poet, and through him for others. In all its mystery, "bogland" is a gift, to be cherished as it is. While the poet may circle around it—indeed, in a sense he feels obliged to—he cannot explain why he is so drawn back to the terrain that produced him, and why when he shares so much with his fellows he nevertheless feels cut off from them, too. It is a question which pursues him. He senses something like solidarity with the man at the very edge of Ireland, "On the most westerly Blasket", alone in the darkness, who "got this air out of the night".

This poem, "The Given Note", remarks that while other people could hear something, only the musician could retrieve the melody:

> Strange noises were heard
> By others who followed, bits of a tune
> Coming in on loud weather
>
> Though nothing like melody.

The musician denies that there is any mystery to his gift, describing the others' "fingers and ear/As unpractised, their fiddling easy". But at the same time the poem suggests that the artist, in this case the musician, has

indeed been "given" something that marks him off from his fellows. What the others heard merely as "strange noises" literally inspired him: he "took in" the "air" of that remote, exposed island and transmuted it in his imagination.

> So whether he calls it spirit music
> Or not, I don't care. He took it
> Out of the wind off mid-Atlantic.
>
> Still he maintains, from nowhere.
> It comes off the bow gravely,
> Rephrases itself into the air.

The fiddler got his melody from the air, or "from nowhere", and in playing it "gravely" in his house he gives something of himself not only to his audience but back into the world it came from. Through him, it "rephrases itself into the air".

The final verb affirms a connection between the fiddler and the poet, who also "rephrases" what only he can hear and gives it back to the world in a new form. But whether he is able to do this because he tries, and practises, he cannot tell—and the poet sees that it does not really matter which: "I don't care". For all his circling about the subject, "all [he] knows" about the "dark" business of creation is that its "door" leads in one direction into the natural world, and in the other into the world of men, and he belongs in both spheres. Yet he remains somehow solitary, breathing an "air" that is full of potential melodies and poems, and "The Given Note" delights in this realization of the world's open-endedness, its inexhaustible richness and surprise, its eternal resistance to fixed explanation.

The seeds must have blown in and taken root. But from where?
From the sea—carried high up in a stream of luminous dust and let fall among us . . .

Suddenly my head is full of flowers of all kind. They sprout out of the earth in deep fields and roll away in my skull.
I have only to name the flowers, without even knowing what they look like, the colour, the shape, the number of petals, and they burst into bud, they click open, they spread their fragrance in my mind, opening out of the secret syllables as I place them like seeds upon my tongue and give them breath.

. . . So it is that the beings we are in process of becoming will be drawn out of us. We have only to find the name and let its illumination fill us. Beginning, as always, with what is simple.

David Malouf
*An Imaginary Life*

## *CHAPTER TWO*

### Gathering Impressions:
### *Wintering Out* (1972)

I

In Heaney's third volume of poetry, *Wintering Out*, he returns to the places where he first started to dream—Anahorish, Broagh, Toome, Derrygarve, and Castledawson—and as he circles this familiar terrain he continues to explore his relationship to the land in an effort to define it. There is a feeling of things being allowed to germinate, of the poet "hunting the pluck/Of water" as the suggestions of waiting and of process in the title are borne out in the poems. Heaney's poetry begins to resemble the bogland itself, as he gathers up his own national treasures before they sink under the weight of change, either in society or in him. In this land that so many people have fought over, he considers their relationship to the terrain as well as his own, and speculates on how that relationship might be opened up and extended. And even when he moves away—imaginatively, as in "The Tollund Man", or actually, as in "Westering"—he always finds himself doubling back to his own ground as he rediscovers how he cannot separate his personal experience as an individual and a poet from the shared experience of his society.

Yet this volume is often regarded as little advance on his first two books. Heaney's early reputation as "a rustic word-spinning Celt with an affection for the simple things of the countryside"[1] implies that he has a way with words, but nothing important to say: "word-spinning" nicely conveys an absence of substance, as if somehow poetry's "ideas" are

---

[1]Christopher Ricks, quoted by Blake Morrison, p.3.

separable from the language that expresses them. Accompanying this notion that Heaney's poetry had no conceptual content of any weight is the belief that the poet should establish firmly his public voice. Gavin Ewart, for example, claimed that "the time has come for [Heaney] to leave his roots alone".[2] And James Fenton, characterizing Heaney's early works as "modern pastoral, vividly imagined and vigorously described", goes on to summarize a widely accepted account of the poet's development: ". . . success as a Faber poet brought the pressure of life as an Irish poet and, above all, as a northerner. Mr Heaney must leave the pastoral world, or, if he stays in it, give some good reason. He had established his voice. Now he was expected to raise it on a public platform. It was a time for great themes and great responsibilities".[3]

From the start Heaney has been concerned with more than using language either for its own sake or to express "great" themes or responsibilities; and his connection with "things of the countryside" is never conveniently "simple". He senses that there are timeless connections between people and the world they inhabit, connections which the poet can make audible to his community. At the same time he sees the natural world to which man is "hooped" as living, and therefore constantly changing, continually to be discovered and rediscovered through language. *Wintering Out* is important as a fertile example of the complementary impulses to explore and to define these intuitions.

Consider for example the poems about language and place-names, "Anahorish", "Broagh" and "Toome". Each of these names sounds out an invitation to him to plumb their meaning. Heaney explains elsewhere that the word "Anahorish" comes from a Gaelic phrase, *anach fhior uisce*,

---

[2]"Chicken Soup," *London Magazine*, 12 (December 1972/January 1973), 133.
[3]"A Dangerous Landscape," *Hibernia*, 25 October 1979, p.14.

which means the place of clear water (*Preoccupations*, p.36). Just naming the place reminds the speaker of the poem that the word is, strictly speaking, neither Gaelic nor English. It is an approximation of the Gaelic word in English sounds, an example of English appropriation of the "sounding" of a subdued culture. To some extent the poem explores the general question of how and to what extent such territory as this may be possessed; when the critic Blake Morrison describes this poem as "an enunciation of divided cultural experience" (p.36), he is focusing on how it conveys something of the fractured history of the place, mirrored as it is in the history of the word. But to leave it at that is to overlook or undervalue the dream-like quality of the poem, which makes its real subject personal creation and possession ("My place . . ."), rather than political re-creation and re-possession. It is a poem that sets out to discover what Anahorish means to Heaney more than to reclaim it for Ireland.

By establishing a connection between himself and the "mound-dwellers" who he imagines once inhabited the place, the speaker strengthens his claim to this "first hill in the world": he sees his affection for it as related to their intimacy with dark and earth. But it is only through the speaker's detachment from the actual place he is so attached to that he can remember and appreciate the "clear water", the "shiny grass" and the "soft gradient/of consonant, vowel-meadow". The mole-like absorption he attributes to the mound dwellers denies them his objectivity. Being part of the complex picture or pattern, they cannot be imagined as standing outside it and interpreting it; they could no more describe Anahorish in this way than they could make this kind of judgment about the value of their way of life. It is because the poet is beyond this world that it can be a series of impressions for him. The

swinging lamps, creating after-images in the misty dark which are then re-created in the poem, are themselves an image of the movement of the poet's imagination backward and forward in time. Anahorish is seen as Heaney's "Personal Helicon", the place that made (and makes) him a poet. Yet while naming a place can open up a whole range of suggestions, the poem also discovers that its accumulated human meaning cannot all be contained in a single word.

Again in "Broagh" a word is sounded, and its sound tested, in a poem that simultaneously uncovers and obscures meaning. "Broagh" is the English spelling of the old Gaelic word "bruach" which means riverbank, and the poem turns on the fact that the local pronunciation of the name is unavailable to "strangers", for whom "that last/*gh* " is "difficult to manage". It is not only this particular sound that excludes the outsider: the opening stanza, which ostensibly makes the place accessible through description, actually renders it inaccessible by using words unfamiliar to "strangers" reading the poem:

> . . . the long rigs
> ending in broad docken
> and a canopied pad . . .

"Rigs" (meaning furrows), "docken" (a plural form of dock) and "pad" (meaning path) are words still in use in Broagh and thereabouts. In creating the description out of the local idiom, the poem savours and celebrates the familiar. At the same time, it almost revels in its power to exclude. If nobody outside Derry uses the word "docken", then in that wider world it has no meaning. And while "Broagh" similarly has no meaning for outsiders, it is safe from change (of the kind suffered by the word's original form).

We get the impression that these are native Irish words, but as Heaney knows, they were brought to Ireland by Scots Planters in the seventeenth century; just as that last "gh" sound in "Broagh", which only the natives can pronounce, was originally an English sound which survives in colonized Ireland though it has disappeared from English.[4] So it is not enough to characterize this poem as "another small hymn to a Londonderry place-name which rehearses in sound the landscape it labels", which is how John Wilson Foster sums up the typical account of the poem (p.44). If "Broagh" merely means "bruach" which means "riverbank", there is no need for the poem, as that equation is made in the first word. The rest of the poem comes into being because Broagh's meaning for the poet is much more complex. The poem becomes itself an attempt to capture meaning—not just a poem "about" this problem, but an example of it.

Heaney's poem suggests how the change in the name took place: the Gaelic "bruach" succumbed to the pronunciation forced on it by the Planters, the "o" that is now the word's central sound being impressed with a force as irresistible as that of a heel "bruis[ing]" the impressionable "garden mould". Bruised, but not broken, the indented garden mould quickly filled with rain, and the mark was incorporated into the landscape:

> The garden mould
> bruised easily, the shower
> gathering in your heelmark
> was the black *O*
>
> in *Broagh* . . .

The Irish adapted to the English influence on their place-name. But in adopting that "black *O*" at the centre of the word, which makes a permanent sign of oppression, they show resilience as well as

---

[4]John Wilson Foster, "The Poetry of Seamus Heaney," p.48.

impressionability. Whether the final sound is pronounced like the original Gaelic or not, the Irish are seen as retaining their private sense of possession. In fact, this is more than resilience; it is resistance. Having had their Gaelic word usurped, they usurp it back again by rendering its pronunciation inaccessible to the original usurpers.

Can that central image, the "black *O*", bear the weight that is laid on it? In one way, the poem answers its own unspoken question, in that it does no more than throw free a number of suggestions, and takes the risk of allowing that hollow "O" at its centre. But does it crystallize a genuine understanding, or is it merely a piece of word-spinning?

The critical interest this poem has aroused nearly always takes the form of attempts to clarify Heaney's political stance; but a tendency to seek out propositions can distract the reader from the separate elements that make up the "low tattoo" of the words themselves. For Neil Corcoran, for example, the inaccessibility of "that last *gh*" to "strangers" (outside Northern Ireland) highlights the common linguistic history of those who can pronounce the sound. This short poem "has a significance in Heaney's work entirely disproportionate to its length", he claims, because "it acts as a linguistic paradigm of a reconciliation beyond sectarian division" (p.90). But it seems to me that to read this poem as a distilled act of faith in the possibility of political and religious harmony is to ignore its *un*cooperative, withholding element, and even to impose a kind of synthesis that the poem itself avoids.

It is not that "Broagh" lacks a political dimension; the critical question is how significant that dimension is. If this poem "uses language as an image to make a political point", as Damian Grant puts it,[5] we need to ask,

---

[5]Damian Grant, "Body Poetic: The Function of A Metaphor in Three Irish Poets," *Poetry Nation*, 1 (1973), 124.

what point? And how sharply defined is it? And is language here merely "being used" in an instrumental way? I think the same questions apply to the third example of a poem exploring a place-name—"Toome". It begins

> My mouth holds round
> the soft blastings,
> *Toome, Toome . . .*

In one sense this poem is an archaeological dig in the loam of "a hundred centuries", and what the "dig" discovers is "fragmented ware": just bits of things, nothing complete or conclusive—merely disconnected items from past lives. There is an impulse in the poem to set the "fragmented ware" in proper order, perhaps to reassemble the bits, to reconstruct an ideal whole; but that impulse is resisted. History as a build-up of layer upon layer (fish-bones to flints, to torcs, to musket-balls, to flints again) is a human construction, and any interpretation of that will ultimately fail to tell a whole and complex story. A poem may mimic an archaeological dig, and its "soft blastings" can blow things into different configurations, but it remains words, soft words, whose power is carried through sound as well as meaning. For all Toome's associations with Ireland's troubled history (critics are fond of pointing out the importance of the place in the 1798 rebellion, for example), it is also important that it sounds like the "tomb" that the poem suggests it is, with its "slab" and its burial goods. Whatever the fascination of such remains, they are also frustrating, because while they can provide details about how people lived in the past, they cannot tell us what we would really like to know: what it was like to live at that time, in that place and as a member of that society. The fragments offer a tempting invitation into a world they do not allow us to enter. Heaney's poem acts in much the same way.

In the opening lines the poet "holds round" the word in his mouth—the mouth being how sounds are made, how tales are told: the conveyor of history. (The Irish carry their history in their mouths.) He savours the sound of the word, as if unable to articulate it. The whole roundness of the word "Toome" has meaning beyond the poem's prospecting, and it thus resists the mining that takes place when the "slab of the tongue" is dislodged. The word "push[es]" back at the efforts of the poem's "I" to delimit its meaning and, in so doing, to destroy its mystery: he finds himself "sleeved" in

> alluvial mud that shelves
> suddenly under
> bogwater and tributaries,
> and elvers tail my hair.

In his attempt to "strike inwards and downwards" in the "bogland" of Toome's history, he loses his footing, and finds himself "suddenly" back among the "hatched fears" of his childhood.

Heaney's poem responds to the danger of fixing his relationship to the place in a way that precludes further imaginative exploration: he surveys the fragments and rolls them around in his imagination as he rolls the word in his mouth, but he does not finally entrust the place to the reader. The poem offers a "prospect" not of the eye, but of the mind. In short, the spirit of the place remains publicly inaccessible; the poet's intimacy with it remains private.

To be publicly accessible, the spirit of a place needs to be largely the spirit of the people who lived there, and in "Toome" people are conspicuously absent. Their importance is explored in "A New Song", which is in a way another place-name poem. It begins very much in the style of an old song: "I met a girl from Derrygarve . . .", but it does not proceed in the way its traditional opening might lead us to expect. The

girl, as an individual, is insignificant: her importance is that in mentioning the place she comes from she sets in train a series of recollections in her listener's mind:

> I met a girl from Derrygarve
> And the name, a lost potent musk,
> Recalled the river's long swerve,
> A kingfisher's blue bolt at dusk
>
> And stepping stones like black molars
> Sunk in the ford, the shifty glaze
> Of the whirlpool, the Moyola
> Pleasuring beneath alder trees.

The focus of this love-song is the place, which is described as if it were the girl, with emphasis on its sensual attractions (the "potent musk", the river's "long swerve"), and on its charming unpredictability (the "kingfisher's blue bolt at dusk" and "the shifty glaze/Of the whirlpool"). This description, and the transformation of the flesh-and-blood girl into a "chance vestal daughter", who, in pouring out the name, poured a "smooth libation of the past", seems to mythologize the place. And up to this point, the poem implicates itself in this kind of ritualizing (and thus falsifying) of the real: these three stanzas are Heaney's own libation to the past.

But libations can be deceptive. The river's "swerve" implies a turning aside or withdrawal as much as a graceful curve. Stepping stones should facilitate crossing, but these are like "black" teeth, "Sunk in the ford" (a mysterious simile: in what way is the ford a mouth?). And the whirlpool, which attracts all towards it, has a "shifty glaze", very close (after those molars) to a "shifty gaze". Is it any wonder that the kingfisher "bolts" at dusk? The "potent musk" of Derrygarve is more than the seductive charm of a young girl; it is the witchery of an old woman. While the poem has been mythologizing the place as apparently beautiful, it has also been

suggesting that this myth cannot be trusted, that there is something treacherous in it.

What relationship does the mythical landscape bear to Heaney's actual "terrain"? According to myth, Ireland as female—whether in the guise of a young girl or an old woman—traditionally seduces young men to fight for her, and their deaths perpetuate the divisive conception of there being legitimate and illegitimate possessors of the land. The last two stanzas suggest that if a mythical sense of place is considered a necessity, then it needs to be constantly invented, or reinvented.

> But now our river tongues must rise
> From licking deep in native haunts
> To flood, with vowelling embrace,
> Desmesnes staked out in consonants.
>
> And Castledawson we'll enlist
> And Upperlands, each planted bawn—
> Like bleaching-greens resumed by grass—
> A vocable, as rath and bullaun.

How are we to take this? What does the poem *mean* here? Readers are disturbed and uncertain. Corcoran comments that "the flooding of a staked desmesne seems . . . an act of aggression, curiously remote, in fact, from a 'vowelling embrace' " (p.86). And Edna Longley strikes a fittingly ambiguous note with her metaphor of "taking on" the English language: "An aesthetic brand of revolutionary action, perhaps more linguistic reclamation than decolonisation, takes on the English language itself, with mixed declarations of love and war".[6]

Although, as Longley points out, Heaney is writing of an aesthetic revolution and is not simply urging the resumption of Protestant territory, it is not immediately clear what form such "action" might take. The first part of the poem offers a clue. In presenting Derrygarve as if

---

[6] *Poetry in the Wars* (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Bloodaxe, 1986), p.176.

nobody actually lived there, as if it were "twilit water" and "Vanished music", and as if an inhabitant of the place were not a real flesh-and-blood girl but a "vestal daughter", it manifests the kind of "licking deep in native haunts" from which the "river tongues must rise": perpetuating the illusion of an ideal, rather than a real, Ireland, in which the soft beauty of the native language conveys the essence of its character and value. The "New Song", the imaginative fresh start, involves making war on these unquestioned and insidious assumptions. This applies to Derrygarve as well as to Castledawson, which was "staked out" by the Planters centuries ago, but which is no less in the possession of the local people because of that. Why should one place be alien because of the sound of its name, and another accessible for the same reason? The poem suggests a possible way in which the word "Castledawson" could become a "vocable" for the Irish—the imaginative act of including it. The English word could be as resonant "as rath", the old Gaelic word for castle, and as "bullaun", Gaelic for mortar, a vessel in which separate ingredients are blended into one. Just as "bleaching-greens", once "staked out" from the rest of the countryside, were ultimately "resumed by grass", differences staked out in language, too, can be resolved—by an act of choice. There may be some resistance (the military imagery implies), "But now" it is time to admit names like Castledawson and Upperlands into the language of meaning, both in the sense of welcoming them ("flood [them] with vowelling embrace"), and also in the sense of admitting that they both shape and are shaped by the history, associations, indeed the life of the people who live and have lived there.

Thus "A New Song" casts another light on those earlier place-name poems. After all, how accessible, how much a "vocable", has the essence of

Anahorish, Broagh or Toome proved? In some ways, these lovely poems of Irish place-names are all instances of "licking deep in native haunts"; "Toome", for instance, can hardly be uttered, and "Broagh" still holds its secrets close. By the end of this poem, Derrygarve, with all its beauty, can be thought of as a real, inhabited place, where "pleasuring" is not confined to the Moyola river, but where it can be a human, and indeed a transitive, activity. Correspondingly, Castledawson and Upperlands are as able and as entitled to call up associations as Derrygarve is. While Corcoran rightly speaks of Anahorish, Toome and Broagh as "the warmly-cherished place-names of Heaney's first home" (p.87), "A New Song" raises the question of whether a name like Castledawson might not be included in such a list. In other words, the poem probes the issue of how such "cherishing" can induce a state of insensibility to, and insularity from, some of the complex elements of the society which promotes that cherishing. And the "mixed declarations of love and war" are in part directed at breaking down the conception of culture as a single entity and embracing a conception of it that recognizes a shaping reciprocity between a society and its members. A "New Song" would emerge from (such) a new society.

Yet there is no certainty here that such a song will be sung; the narcotic allure of the early stanzas pulls powerfully against the later imperatives and certainties, and any comfort or refuge that this rhetoric might seem to offer is undercut by the understanding that it ultimately contributes to one or other unyielding alternative. The poet's imagination moves around these questions, but no strategies or solutions are offered; indeed, even the final image of "bleaching-greens resumed by grass" withholds the comfort it appears to offer. From one vantage point, it is desirable: the native grass will resume its rightful possession, "flooding" and "embracing" the marks

of the Plantation as it does so. But from another perspective, this is very close to the old idea that the jungle always swallows up the clearing, suggesting that Irish nationalism and self-definition feed on the same old song, and that lasting change cannot take place until or unless people can forget, as well as remember, the past.

II

These questions are probed further in "Gifts of Rain", a more ambitious poem. In exploring the difficult and apparently contradictory relationship between man and the place he thinks of as his own, this poem recognizes that it is entering an area that remains little understood, and that might best be "understood" through the kind of "wise passiveness" that Heaney admires in Wordsworth (*Preoccupations*, p.63), rather than through the interrogation of "ideas" abstracted from lived experience. Conor Cruise O'Brien, in an article examining what he considered the "unhealthy intersection" between literature and politics, asked "if Ireland were ever to cease to be oppressed, what would happen to history, how would one get into it?"[7] In "Gifts of Rain" Heaney offers a possible answer to that question. The first stanza introduces a creature standing in the downpour, absorbed by it:

> . . . Still mammal,
> straw-footed on the mud,
> he begins to sense weather
> by his skin.

The intimacy between the static creature and his fluid environment is emphasized as the flooding river "licks over stepping stones" with its "nimble snout". This exploratory, hunting process of the flood is in keeping with the poem's own processes. Licking and "uprooting", the

---

[7] "An Unhealthy Intersection," *The New Review*, 2 , No. 16 (1975), 7.

flood tastes and tests and turns things over, exploring the terrain and defining its boundaries. Similarly, the man facing the flooding river "fords/his life"—finds his way through it—"by sounding". While "sounding" means testing the depth, searching out the shallow water, it also suggests the tentative ways in which we sound an opinion, or test ideas, using somebody as a sounding board. And of course language itself is a system of sounds.

In the second section of "Gifts of Rain" the flooded land is described as "lost fields", referring to its possession by the river. The phrase "lost fields" has a history beyond this poem. It is also the title of a novel by Michael McLaverty, an Ulster writer whose "fosterage" Heaney acknowledges in *North* (p.71). The novel traces the bonds between a family and their farm at Toome, and hints at a variety of factors contributing to the Irish loss of their fields, some—but not all—of them acts of nature or of inept husbandry.[8] Like McLaverty's novel, Heaney's poem includes a knowledge that the Irish were dispossessed of their best fields by the Planters in the seventeenth century, and were left with only rocky uplands or low-lying ground bordering lakes and rivers, where their efforts at cultivation would be lost in periods of heavy rain. Thus "lost" refers not merely to the submerging of the fields, and to their incapacity to sustain life, but also to the man who for whatever reason has been deprived of the identity he had once seen reflected in the marks he had put on the land. Heaney is very receptive to other people's explorations of the attachment they feel towards their land, and it seems to me that this welcoming response to the influence of related ideas, uncurbed by an anxiety to reach conclusions or to take a particular line, is a mark of the

---

[8]Michael McLaverty, *Lost Fields* (New York: Longmans & Co., 1941).

best work in *Wintering Out*. A good example of this is the image of the wading man whose hands "grub" into the earth seeking contact with an "atlantis he depends on", with a mythical civilization, lost under water, whose coherence he needs to believe in. He gropes for a sense of oneness with the earth, a kind of innocent or prelapsarian sense of belonging in which any human experience of loss would have no part, and in a movement which recalls the diviner's sense of connection with the world which nourishes him. The act of "grubbing" is not, in this context, reducing or demeaning, as it is in an earlier poem, "At a Potato Digging" (*Death of a Naturalist*, p.32), where starving famine-victims are "grubbing, like plants, in the bitch earth". Here the image suggests that the man grows out of, and is a product of that land as much as he is the grower of its "cropping" produce:

> he is hooped to where he planted
> and sky and ground
>
> are running naturally among his arms
> that grope the cropping land.

The union he seeks is, in this moment, bestowed on him by the poem.

The focus of the third section of "Gifts of Rain" is not simply on individual attachment, but on a communal sense of belonging. The poem imagines the people who settled by the Moyola's banks attuned to the river's music without consciously listening to it—their acceptance of it as part of their life allowing them to be affectionately disparaging: "the Moyola harping on . . . ". The poem's "soundings" include different kinds of understanding. While the "race" that slabbers past the gable refers on one level to the flood, it also calls up the sum of human relationships, the social and cultural achievements which constitute "the race". Words like "gathering", and the "usual/confabulations" suggest an intimate social

group, with "their own airs" implying not only their own music, but a mixture of their confidence, their foolish affectations and even their grievances. But there is more to "confabulation" than mere social gathering. The *Oxford English Dictionary* tells us that the word, which relates to "fable", also refers to an imaginary experience devised after the loss of memory. Again the poem explores (as in "the atlantis he depends on") the necessity for recreating a lost past. The following lines take up, or perhaps listen to, the idea that establishing a connection with the past makes possible a fuller understanding of the present:

> I cock my ear
> at an absence—
> in the shared calling of blood
>
> arrives my need
> for antediluvian lore.

Receptive, the poet's "cock[ed] . . . ear" can make out "Soft voices of the dead/. . . whispering by the shore". His "need" for the "lore" that is lost is stated; the speaker tries to make sense of the present by absorbing the past into it, but beyond that no parallels are forced.

Acknowledging that it is in the nature of floods to wash things away (the "lore" that is sought is "antediluvian"), the poem also probes the question of whether there might not be benefit, as well as loss, in the river's capacity to obliterate. In the second section, the man with the "lost fields" was pictured almost as if he had lost his lover: the "flower" that "bloom[ed] up to his reflection" combined with his "groping" touch of "the cropping land" to present an image of the land as feminine. The fourth and final section further explores the sensual aspect of human relationship with the natural world, seeing it as a form of male-female interdependence where each can be a gift to the other. But merging with the male/female imagery are suggestions of the river's musicality, and

these link in with the earlier images of a social culture: the very sound of the word "Moyola" suggests not just the river's own music, but the sound of the native people's speech:

> The tawny guttural water
> spells itself: Moyola
>
> is its own score and consort . . .

A musical "score" includes all parts—for different instruments and different voices: the Moyola has witnessed and absorbed all that has gone before; and one of the harmonizing parts of its "consort" is the "Soft voices of the dead". "Score" also suggests keeping accounts—that registering of losses and gains which is one large element of history. And of course in a physical sense the river has scored, has marked out, its own boundaries. Like the inhabitants who depend on it, it has, over time, defined its territory. The musical image is not separate from the others: the poem is not only exploring language and the inter-relationship of past and present; it does so with a complex interweaving of attitudes that constantly defies clear definition and established boundaries.

"Tawny" and "guttural", the Moyola is a sensuous consort, working her "spell" on the people who hear her music. Yet the fact remains that the river is flooding, forcefully broadening its contours without any negotiation with the people. Hence pain, merely "sounded" in an earlier line ("break[ing] the pane"), is seen as integral to the man's love affair with his terrain. The river's guttural "utterance" is also "reed music", its tale harmonizing with the plaintive local pipe music. Reeds for these pipes grow by the river and survive the turbulence of flood and storm, vibrating to every change in circumstances. "Old chanter" reinforces the almost symbiotic relationship between the river's music and that of her inhabitants (a chanter being the reed pipe in the bagpipes), but again

Heaney's words are not tied to a single denotation. A chanter's song is simple and essentially repetitive. Carrying the authority of traditional wisdom and beliefs, it is often a song of praise, as in psalms, hymns and canticles. Thus the river's music is understood as a timeless song, a well-known tale which, like a fable (and indeed like this poem itself) is told and retold for its intrinsic pleasure and for its intuition of an understanding larger than our individual lives.

Like many of the poems in *Wintering Out*, "Gifts of Rain" supports T.S. Eliot's claim that poetry may communicate before it is understood. Its elements are all related, but they are not logically or chronologically connected: they react against each other in the way notes and chords and phrases do in a piece of music, and this is actually one of the elements of the poem. To say that it is musical or melodic is to agree with Eliot that our response to the poem does not solely depend on a clear comprehension of its elements.

While the poem does not force any of its points, it does imply that openness and sensitivity to the rhythms of a land and its history is a way to real riches, an understanding that what is shared and "common" is more valuable than any "hoard[ing]", however tempting or desirable that might be. In this, it is notably different from "Anahorish", "Broagh" and "Toome". Yet in "Gifts of Rain" Heaney's complex attitudes to the past are still much the same. As the river floods and changes its boundaries, so the course of history likewise gives and takes away. To appreciate the presence of the past involves being receptive and open, rather than having a mind closed to any but one possibility. But keeping the mental doors and windows open is not always easy, or comfortable, and this applies to the reader as well as the poet.

The best critics of Heaney's poetry are aware of this necessity. Neil Corcoran, for example, describes Heaney's method in "Gifts of Rain" as "a rich suggestiveness and implication, a language stirring vibrantly with possible meanings rather than settling into declaration" (p.85). And yet pushing against even that critical sensitivity is a desire for certainty or "declaration": Corcoran goes on to interpret the flood in the final section as "represent[ing] some new political possibility for Ireland: one that, in some harmonizing and reconciling way, will 'pleasure' the poem's 'I', making him a 'Dives', the paradigmatic biblical rich man, by establishing, on this divided soil, 'common ground' " (p.85). Certainly Heaney engages with Irish political and historical experience in the poem. But while the flood may indeed "represent some new political possibility", it "represents" much more than this to the "poem's 'I' ", who in describing himself as "Dives" is aware of the ironies involved. Dives hoarded his possessions, even his food, unwilling to spare a crumb for the beggar Lazarus, but later in hell burned with thirst and yearned for a drop of water. The poem recognizes the biblical lesson that hoarding also involves depriving, and sometimes even starving, others, and the warning that retribution will be visited on those who refuse to share; at the same time, in its own possessive cherishing of the riverland, it gives weight to the urge to hoard, to an instinctive reluctance to release or give up or even share "the common ground". Furthermore, Corcoran's phrase "divided soil" is a construct from *beyond* the poem; within "Gifts of Rain", river, man, land "and sky and ground/are running naturally" together. The poem, like the flooding river, establishes its territory in the process of its movement, and encompasses a whole range of experience, including the knowledge that Irish history (of community and of invasion, of

cultivating the land and of famine, of peace and of bloodshed, of cultural dispossession and of social restructuring) has left marks on the landscape, and that these marks are part of the folk memory. Not an "allegory" (*pace* Corcoran), or a metaphor, or a fable, the poem's meaning cannot be detached from it, but can only be discovered in its texture and its music.

III

To be able to write in this way, a poet must be susceptible to influences from different directions. Yet a significant number of critics have argued that Heaney's angle of vision on Ireland is distinctly narrow. Norman Vance, for example, claims that "Non-Catholic Ulster is resented rather than fully explored in Heaney's Ulster poetry."[9] But is Heaney's vision as narrow as is sometimes thought? His poem "Traditions", for example, is usually read as an expression of a single perspective on Irish history, suppressing the claims of any other account and above all suppressing any feelings of doubt, uncertainty or irresolution. But rather than just repeat an old song, it explores and *tests*, even more openly than the poems I have discussed already, the narrow (and narrowing) tradition that the maiden Ireland was ruined by the brutish invader, her language (her identity) scorned, and a new one inflexibly imposed on her.

The initial proclamatory tone of "Traditions" seems to allow for no tolerance or accommodation, as if its holders were the only inheritors of the absolute truth:

---

[9]Norman Vance, *Irish Literature: A Social History: Tradition, Identity and Difference* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), p.245. See also George Watson, "The Narrow Ground: Northern Poets and the Northern Ireland Crisis," in *Irish Writers and Society at Large*, ed. Masaru Sekine. Irish Literary Studies 22 (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1985), pp.207-24.

Our guttural muse
was bulled long ago
by the alliterative tradition,
her uvula grows

vestigial, forgotten
like the coccyx
or a Brigid's Cross
yellowing in some outhouse . . .

With their eyes fixed on the "long ago" past, cherishing "archaisms" and "obstinately" retaining the language brought by the settlers, the Irish remain victims. But while the poem represents this way of seeing, it does not endorse it: there is a kind of double-vision right through the poem, as conflicting connotations of words push against each other. The suggestion of rape in the word "bulled", for instance, is complicated or undermined by the word's multiple meanings, including the seventeenth-century meaning "to make a fool of, to mock or cheat", and especially an "Irish bull", which the *O.E.D.* describes as "a self-contradictory proposition; in modern use, an expression involving a ludicrous inconsistency unperceived by the speaker".

All the metaphoric terms in the apparently straightforward assertion of the opening stanza reveal similar fissures. The "Brigid's Cross/yellowing in some outhouse" is in fact doing what it was made for: in *Preoccupations* Heaney describes how on St Brigid's Eve green rushes "were worked into Brigid's crosses that would deck the rooms and outhouses for the rest of the year" (p.133). One implication of the comparisons, then, is that the uvula was destined (in the course of history) to grow vestigial, its fate was inevitable, and its loss no more tragic than the diminished importance of the coccyx in the course of evolution. Pushing against this are claims for the uvula's significance. For one thing, it has to be vibrated in order to pronounce such guttural

sounds as "that last/*gh*" in "Broagh"—sounds that come from far back in the throat and far back in the history of native speech: history and the articulation of history are thus intimately connected. The decline of the uvula is not merely regretted; it is resisted, as the line and stanza stop at "grows" (enacting the kind of contradictory impulses that generate the poem's energy). Indeed, there is even some willed optimism for the "guttural" uvula: to grow vestigial is to leave a trace—not to be completely "forgotten", but to remain a visible sign or reminder of what once was (as the vestige, meaning "footprint", on the garden mould in "Broagh" left "the black *O*" which made that poem possible). By contrast the coccyx, as part of the alliterative tradition, may be forgotten without regret.

The word "uvula" also functions as a female sound to counteract the more male "coccyx". Heaney says, "I think of the personal and Irish pieties as vowels, and the literary awarenesses nourished on English as consonants" (*Preoccupations*, p.37), and if we sound these words aloud we can appreciate something of Heaney's playful delight in relishing and savouring language. Just as masculine and feminine are interdependent, so language is formed by the interaction of consonants and vowels, and Heaney's poetry is the product of a mind that has its roots in conflicting traditions and finds this cleft inheritance to be both sustaining and energizing. "Traditions" (written in English) is no simple lament that Gaelic "grows vestigial", although that is clearly part of its intuition. When Blake Morrison characterizes Heaney's tone here as "elegiac, seemingly resigned to English sovereignty" (p.41), he is missing the poem's sheer enjoyment of the flexibility of the English language. But if

"Traditions" is not a lament for the languishing guttural muse, is it then a celebration of English sovereignty?

> We are to be proud
> of our Elizabethan English . . .

Like Stephen Dedalus and his "tundish" (whose preoccupation with the English language as power is referred to in "The Wool Trade"), the Irish may feel proud that they speak English, "and good old blunt English too. Damn the dean of studies and his funnel!"[10] Yet the preservation of "correct Shakespearean" words in the speech of Northern Ireland is not recorded uncritically. Do the "we" of the poem consider themselves honoured or privileged to have their natural tendency towards speculative, imaginative apprehension violated through the violation of their speech? "Deem" and "allow" are words that make judgments, words that measure and quantify in a way the looser word "suppose" does not:

> we 'deem' or we 'allow'
> when we suppose . . .

Or is it that the Irish are "supposed" to feel proud that they are, as Oscar Wilde put it, condemned to speak the language of Shakespeare? The third section of "Traditions" sets Shakespeare's own rendition of Irish speech and preoccupation with national identity in the comic figure of Macmorris from *Henry V*—"What ish my nation?"—against other Elizabethan descriptions of the Irish

> as going very bare
> of learning, as wild hares,
> as anatomies of death . . .

This is Spenser's on-the-spot description of people being starved into submission:

---

[10]James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973), p.251.

> Out of every corner of the woods and glens they came, creeping forth upon their hands and their legs could not bear them, they looked anatomies of death, they spake like ghosts crying out of their graves . . .[11]

That Heaney is deeply moved by these lines is suggested by the fact that they have become part of his poetic "terrain": he also refers to them in "Bog Oak" (p.15). "Traditions" contrasts this historical acount with James Joyce's more inclusive and "sensible" understanding of what Irishness might consist in, all the time allowing that the simple truth is far from simple:

> And sensibly, though so much
> later, the wandering Bloom
> replied, 'Ireland,' said Bloom,
> 'I was born here. Ireland.'

But does a birth certificate alone establish nationality? We might put alongside Bloom's "sensible" reply the Duke of Wellington's celebrated remark about not necessarily being a horse if you were born in a stable. Bloom is Irish because he is involved in the life around him—affected and shaped by it. So is Heaney, and so are many people whose beliefs, backgrounds and "traditions" differ both from the poet's and from each other.

Again and again, one interpretation or tradition is interrogated or resisted by another. And even this account of the poem's complexity tends to simplify it—to split it into two mutually-exclusive alternative ways of seeing—when it is more ambiguous than that, less sure of itself. The ambiguity or indeterminacy of meaning is a result of the poet's exploration of Irish culture or society not as given or fixed, but as created and recreated by its peoples' continuing choices to embrace or reject different ways of seeing their situation (being "bed[ded] . . . down into/the

---

[11]Edmund Spenser, *A View of the Present State of Ireland*, ed. W.L. Renwick (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970), p.104.

British isles"). In other words, as a member of the social and cultural world he writes about, the poet himself is shaped by the material he is shaping into a poem. It should come as no surprise, then, that the language "shuttle[s]" in different directions.

Adjoining "Traditions" is another poem about changes in language, "The Backward Look", and the title recalls T.S.Eliot's realization of the connections between the past and the present:

> The backward look behind the assurance
> Of recorded history, the backward half-look
> Over the shoulder, towards the primitive terror . . . [12]

When Heaney's mind is on the present, it swings back to question "the assurance of recorded history", and, encountering there "the primitive terror" it is swung back to the present. This constant movement is reflected in his language, which encompasses more than one understanding, more than one tradition. While some critics are irritated by or impatient with this quality of the poetry and call it "indecisiveness", I consider it a strength. Turbulence and ambivalence can be a more appropriate response to complex experience than clarity and definition. As the words chalked up on a Belfast wall put it, "Anyone who isn't confused here doesn't understand what's going on".

So while on the one hand the poetry in *Wintering Out* expresses a need to make sense of history and personal experience—to get these things into some perspective—on the other, it keeps discovering how any perspective can offer only a partial truth. And Heaney is not inclined to settle for a single perspective, charges of vacillation and indecisiveness notwithstanding. He is not one to flatten out the complexities of life—the kind of person Keats pinpoints when he described his friend Dilke as a

---

[12] "The Dry Salvages," *Collected Poems 1909-1962* (London: Faber and Faber, 1970), p.209.

man "who cannot feel he has a personal identity unless he has made up his mind about everything".[13] Keats goes on to claim that "the only means of strengthening one's intellect is to make up one's mind about nothing—to let the mind be a thoroughfare for all thoughts. Not a select party." There is of course an aesthetic difficulty in allowing the mind to be a thoroughfare and yet shaping its perceptions into a poem. But it raises moral questions too: whether in remaining uncommitted one joins the world's vast company of floating voters, the "Don't Knows" who "lack all conviction" and may therefore be led by the nose by the few who are "full of passionate intensity". If it is possible to stand by your indecision, and be utterly committed to remaining uncommitted, is it admirable?

## IV

While these entangled issues continue to provoke and preoccupy Heaney in his later work, his early exploration of them in *Wintering Out* is not always fully recognized. Even here, some complicated questions are implied in the poetry, questions about the relationship between personal and national identity, between the poet's conception of history, culture, and traditions and the conceptions of other members of his community. If we read *Wintering Out* interrogatively, asking who is speaking to whom, and why, we find that different poems provide different answers. While "Anahorish" is a very personal search for understanding, "Broagh" is more complicated: in what sense does Heaney *know* that "the shower/gathering in your heelmark/was the black *O*/in *Broagh*"? And who is the "you" of the poem? Is it an outsider, and if so why is the poem being offered to this "stranger"? If it is a native, what is the relationship

---

[13]*Letters of John Keats*, ed. Robert Gittings (London: Oxford Univ.Press, 1970), p.326.

between the heel's impression and the English impression on the native language? The voice in "A New Song" is more sure of itself ("our river tongues must rise . . . we'll enlist"), because the speaker has a role within his community, even if it is uncertain whether that role is as spokesman or prophet.

So the voice ranges from private to public within the volume, and sometimes even loops around within a single poem, as in "The Tollund Man". The first part of that poem, the speaker's pledge to go to Aarhus, is personal and urgent, written for and to himself. In the central section, there is a hesitant but noticeable temptation to adopt a more public voice:

> I could risk blasphemy,
> Consecrate the cauldron bog
> Our holy ground . . .

Despite the hypothetical stance, in a way Heaney *does* "Consecrate the cauldron bog/Our holy ground" throughout the volume. While there is a difference between saying you "could risk" adopting a public voice and actually speaking in one, it is a fine line that separates the two. There is almost a note of conjecture here, and we, too, might ask why the matter of Ireland pushes its way into a poem about the Tollund Man. In his essay, "Feeling into Words", Heaney tells of his discovery of P.V. Glob's book *The Bog People*.[14] This was in 1969, which he describes as "the year the killing started":

> . . . the unforgettable photographs of these victims blended in my mind with photographs of atrocities, past and present in the long rites of Irish political and religious struggles. (*Preoccupations*, pp.57-58)

If Heaney can believe the Tollund Man's sacrifice had a purpose, a meaning, he can also believe that the anonymous "labourers" and young brothers died for a reason. When the soft and gentle maiden was raped by

---

[14]*The Bog People* (London: Faber and Faber, 1969).

the big bruiser from across the water, who set out for vengeance but her "four young brothers"? And their spilt blood is their "libation", just as the scattered flesh lying on the ground like seeds will "make germinate" another crop of young rebels. But can he simply accept that way of seeing, that "Aarhus" is *really* "our house"? Heaney tells us he first saw the Tollund Man's head in a photograph, and the images of the local "atrocities" came from photographs too. When he tries to superimpose one photograph upon another he finds that they will not exactly fit.

Like "Toome", then, "The Tollund Man" is a poem about attempting to construct the truth from fragments or impressions—a necessary process that is, however, doomed to fail. How can anyone be certain what story the "Tell-tale skin and teeth" are telling? The "Stockinged corpses"—vulnerable, bootless—are laid out "in the farmyards": are they not worthy, then, of proper ceremony and ritual such as "The cap, noose and girdle" that accompanied the Tollund Man's death? Or does the "scattered, ambushed/Flesh" remain unburied precisely because these deaths should not be buried and forgotten for a couple of thousand years? The uncertainty and doubt are so strong that the investigation cannot be pursued: it is dropped, unresolved, with the image of the death of the "four young brothers, trailed/For miles along the lines." Along the railway lines—or along the lines of the Tollund Man?

Heaney feels the need of some vantage-point from which he can see clearly how the killings are related. But it is he himself who relates them; there is no vantage-point beyond the confines of his own mind from which he can make a clear evaluation or judgment. "The Tollund Man", like the rest of his poetry, explores the boundary, the no-man's-land, between different ways of seeing and understanding. He tells us:

> I have always listened for poems, they come sometimes like bodies out of a bog, almost complete, seeming to have been laid down a long time ago, surfacing with a touch of mystery. (*Preoccupations*, p.34)

But nothing rises miraculously out of the bog, "almost complete", as if the poet had no connection with it. Heaney does not simply dig into history and retrieve treasures, like the "Trove of the turf-cutters'/Honeycombed workings" which is lifted out and put on display in Aarhus. His creative individuality adds another layer to the cultural wealth he is trying to explore and define. And in the process of our own attempts to understand that culture (i.e. reading the poetry), our understanding shifts too. Heaney's poem about the Tollund Man makes that preserved head relevant to our own way of seeing. If you go to Aarhus and look at it, what you will see and think and feel will be shaped, in part, by this poem.

At the end of the poem Heaney imagines himself experiencing "Something" of the Tollund Man's "sad freedom". The freedom the Tollund Man embodies is that of a victim, free from responsibility and choice. But while the poem sees that, it also registers a yearning for that "freedom", because if it is beyond responsibility and choice, it is also beyond guilt. Heaney feels guilty because he writes poetry and does not "risk" dying; it would relieve his guilt to be in the Tollund Man's place, singled out and seen by the anonymous "country people" as he rode "the tumbril", like Sydney Carton in *A Tale of Two Cities*. If he gave his life (both real and poetic life) for a cause, he too could look "peaceful . . . sublime and prophetic", and could say the words which "the voices of his education" recall: "It is a far, far better thing that I do, than I have ever done; it is a far, far better rest that I go to than I have ever known".[15] Instead of imagining such certainty Heaney finds himself simply "Saying

---

[15]Charles Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities* (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1910), p.466.

the names . . . Tollund, Grauballe, Nebelgard", sensing they have the kind of significance that Anahorish, Broagh and Toome have for him, but unable to fathom their meaning. Committing himself to a choice between fighting and writing is the "blasphemy" he "could risk", but does not—even in the poetry, because it would be a sin against his own nature to close the door on speculation and wonder, and make a choice between the contraries that claim him.

Boundaries and frontiers, thresholds and doorways are recurring tropes in Heaney's poetry, and this preoccupation has a temporal as well as spatial dimension: with history "staked out" in periods and episodes, Heaney is drawn to its turning-points, gaps and repetitions. Divisions (whether social, historical, political, geographical, linguistic or religious) are established by the human mind and enshrined in language, and poetry at its best can transcend these divisions without denying or assenting to them. In his inaugural lecture as Professor of Poetry at Oxford, Heaney described how, when poetry "contain[s] within itself the co-ordinates of the reality which surrounds it and out of which it is generated . . . it functions as the rim of the silence out of which consciousness arrives and into which it must descend."[16]

The process Heaney speaks of here is manifested in his poem "The Other Side", which explores the perception that a line of demarcation is also a line of contact. While the title draws attention to the unbridged divide between opposing perceptions, the imagery emphasizes conjunction: "his lea sloped/to meet our fallow"; "a wake of pollen/ drifting to our bank"; "Your side of the house", with its suggestion of bridgeable distance (and even union) rather than a yawning gulf. The

---

[16]*The Redress of Poetry* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), p.11.

foreign ways of the Protestant landholder are absorbed by the Catholic child, internalized in an attempt to understand them:

> my ear swallowing
> his fabulous, biblical dismissal,
> that tongue of chosen people.

On the one hand, language can translate a foreign experience and make it available to us if we listen with the desire to understand. But on the other hand, "swallowing" suggests gullible acceptance as well as absorbing; "fabulous" can mean absurd as well as marvellous; and the other side's "dismissal" implies not just irrelevance but also a summary closing of a case which, the volume as a whole implies, requires open exploration.

Despite the poem's complexities, Heaney discovered that it had been taken up by politicians to argue that Catholics and Protestants in rural Ulster lived in harmony:

> I remember the Minister of Community Relations, when such a thing existed in the North, saying this poem ["The Other Side"] shows us how we can get on together and so on. Now it's not the whole truth. As well as the rituals for the courtesies, the co-existence, there were the brutalities and the divisions which made these rituals necessary. So I consciously tried [in later works], slightly against my social nature, which is very much a bland one, to put the prejudices and Catholic resentments to work.[17]

With a writer who talks about his own work as generously as Heaney does, it is well to remember Lawrence's advice and trust the poem, not the poet. For despite his suggestion that in this poem one of the "co-ordinates of the reality . . . out of which it is engendered" is under-represented, a close reading reveals that the language encompasses both division and harmony. The pollen that drifts across the stream suggests the cross-fertilization that the poem explores. The neighbour is "fabulous" and fascinating; his way of seeing extends the speaker's, just as the Catholic rituals and practices he observes exert a shaping influence on

---

[17]Interview with Helen O'Shea, *Quadrant*, Sept. 1981, p.15.

him. Even so, they remain strangers. The biblical references leave Heaney's attitude to union unclear: while the neighbour refers to Old Testament figures whose lives testify both for and against the rule of endogamy ("Lazarus, the Pharaoh, Solomon/and David and Goliath"), the "tares" point to the New Testament parable in which weeds, "planted" by an enemy, were tolerated only until they could do no harm to the wheat, and were then destroyed (Matthew xiii. 24-30). The poem also refers obliquely to the story of the good Samaritan and the Pharisee who passed by "on the other side"—a parable Christ told in answer to the question "Who is my neighbour?" (Luke x. 25-37). If "the other side" is tolerated in this poem, it is not flooded with a vowelling embrace that obliterates all marks of division. For all the latitude the poem allows the privileged, Protestant "side", it also gives a voice to what Heaney calls "the prejudices and Catholic resentments". The poem is an open exploration of the "rim" where possession and dispossession meet, its tentative ending—with a question, rather than a solution—suggesting that it is the "common ground", the earth we share, that holds the seeds of growth and harmony.

Heaney sees that this intuition—that man and nature are interdependent, nourishing and sustaining each other—has hardened, over time, into rules to live by; in defining what is permissible, human societies and religions make distinctions and draw lines which nature does not. "Limbo" is about a woman who, by drowning her "illegitimate" child, crosses over into that realm between heaven and hell. In one sense it is an ageless tale of the tragedy that overcomes a "chance vestal daughter". But Heaney's response to the story presents the young mother as beyond choice, as if society or the church's rules do battle with her intuitive moral sense.

> . . . But I'm sure
> As she stood in the shallows
> Ducking him tenderly
> . . .
> He was a minnow with hooks
> Tearing her open.

In imagining the pressures which led to her agony, Heaney himself feels the "hooks/tearing [him] open". The most moving line of the poem, "Ducking him tenderly", is also the most revealing of Heaney's sympathy for her as a victim of the attitudes and values of her religion. But you do not duck a child tenderly when you drown him—you hold him under the water until he is dead. The poem intercedes for the woman: she, not her baby, is condemned to Limbo, for his drowning is also his Baptism ("He was hauled in with the fish" by Christ the Fisherman). The poem ends, however, by claiming that to some extent Christ's sacrifice was in vain:

> Even Christ's palms, unhealed,
> Smart and cannot fish there.

She crosses over the rim of her fear of God's retribution and her trust in Christ's forgiveness, in the belief that she is excluded from Christ's invitation, "Suffer little children to come unto me." In the adjoining poem "Bye-Child", the unwanted child was not drowned but allowed to live in a different kind of limbo. The embryonic image of the child, with all its connotations of fruitfulness and potential, is subverted. He suffers deprivation, confined in the henhouse where he is bent over (hooped), grubbing amongst the dust and chicken droppings.

In protesting against this denial of what ought to be allowed to grow, the poem is representative of the urge throughout *Wintering Out* to resist the kind of containment or confinement which limits ways of seeing. Yet the fact of the boy's physical confinement makes it possible for him to bypass restrictions which society would have put upon him, and to

experience "something of [the] sad freedom" to which Heaney himself is drawn. Another victim, the henhouse boy is "proof/Of lunar distances/Travelled beyond love."

The volume ends with a poem about possibility beyond lines and boundaries: "Westering". Heaney sits under the "Official Map of the Moon" with its marks all set in place, and thinks about what the moon means for the human imagination. He resists the ordinary conception of the moon hanging above his head, refuses to believe all its connotations can be contained in that official circle. His imagination takes him back, through the map's "enlarged pores", to his "last night/In Donegal"; and from there he retraces his departure from Ireland and all the rituals he left behind when he went to America. By "Westering" he has escaped the restrictions of the social and religious codes that made possible the fates of the Tollund Man, the drowned baby, and the henhouse boy.

> Six thousand miles away,
> I imagine untroubled dust,
> A loosening gravity,
> Christ weighing by his hands.

In America Heaney finds himself in transit, his own gravity loosening. The world seems to have turned upside down, as men walk on the moon and everywhere eyes are on the future rather than on the present or the past. His "free fall" has given him something in common with the neighbour in "The Other Side", who is free of the pull of the rosary "dragging on". (In space travel literature a "free fall" is a condition of suspension between two states.) In a later essay Heaney recalls with approval "Stephen Dedalus's enigmatic declaration that the shortest way to Tara was via Holyhead, implying that departure from Ireland and inspection of the country from the outside was the surest way of getting to

the core of Irish experience."[18] Yet despite Heaney's own distance or detachment in "Westering", he retains the "stigmata" of the society and place that have shaped him. The poem's final image of "Christ weighing by his hands" suggests the burden, the price, Heaney feels he has inherited together with the gift of poetry. Because he persists in circling around every issue, trying to see it in all its complexity and encompass that complexity in his poetry, he is open to the accusation of being uncommitted; the inversion of Christ's position implies a temporary respite from his responsibility for humanity, and the poet feels that for a time he too has been freed of his intimate relationship with the problems of Ireland. But the image he has created still involves weighing things up, suggesting that he is unable to change his nature even when he has been removed to the other side of the world. The final image offers no definitive standpoint, no conclusion; it reflects the open-endedness, the range and the (fruitfully muddled) honesty of the volume as a whole.

---

[18] "The Impact of Translation" (1986) in *The Government of the Tongue* (London: Faber and Faber, 1988), p.40.

. . . he raised his eyes towards the slowdrifting clouds, dappled and seaborne. They were voyaging across the deserts of the sky, a host of nomads on the march, voyaging high over Ireland. . . . The Europe they had come from lay out there beyond the Irish Sea, Europe of strange tongues and valleyed and woodbegirt and citadelled and of entrenched and marshalled races. He heard a confused music within him as of memories and names which he was almost conscious of. . .

So timeless seemed the grey warm air, so fluid and impersonal his own mood, that all ages were as one to him. A moment before the ghost of the ancient kingdom of the Danes had looked forth through the vesture of the hazewrapped city. Now . . . he seemed to hear the noise of dim waves and to see a winged form flying above the waves and slowly climbing the air. What did it mean? Was it a quaint device opening a page of some medieval book of prophecies and symbols, . . . a prophecy of the end he had been born to serve and had been following through the mists of childhood and boyhood, a symbol of the artist forging anew in his workshop out of the sluggish matter of the earth a new soaring impalpable imperishable being?

James Joyce
*A Portrait of the Artist*
*as a Young Man*

## *CHAPTER THREE*

### The Music of Division:
### *North* (1975)

In the process of Heaney's "wintering out", his questions, while still personal, widened in range and in scope to ask "Can poetry's exploration of our cultural origins help us to discover where, both as individuals and as nation, we are headed? and might it suggest new ways of relating to each other along the way?" Such questions are pressed further in *North*. This volume, central in studies of Heaney, is often regarded as his most unified work. But Heaney himself conceived of this as a divided book, when he grouped the poems into two parts: "The two halves of the book constitute two different types of utterance, each of which arose out of a necessity to shape and give palpable linguistic form to two kinds of urgency—one symbolic, one explicit."[1] But *North* is also divided in a different sense: it pushes and pulls in different directions, within each "half" and even within individual poems. Heaney looks back to the past with his mind on the present and the future, and while at times the poetry focuses on centrality and stability, looking to other societies—notably the ancient Vikings—in an attempt to understand more fully the poet's own, at other times it dwells on the significance of constant change, of instability. And these two ways of looking at history conflict, often leaving the poet facing an impasse. He finds that the disadvantage of a cyclical view is that it can suggest that life and its rhythms are a trap

---

[1]Interview with Seamus Deane, "Unhappy and at Home," *The Crane Bag*, 1, No. 1 (1977), 66.

(stronger than human will) condemning mankind to futile repetitions and making no allowance for the possibility of breakthrough. But life seen as a series of separate, countable moments, always on the move, offering no centre, no integrity, can also appear sinister: a life without rhythms is a life where no meaning can be found. Heaney's attempts to understand and resolve the conflict between these two ways of looking at history in *North* sometimes takes the poetry in different directions, and sometimes holds it in a closed circle so that it appears endlessly to return to its point of origin.

The volume is remarkable for the urgency and the excitement with which Heaney pursues his quest. Amid the social and political turmoil in Ulster in the early 1970s he felt increasingly obliged to live up to his own expectations of himself, as well as to the expectations of others. Like the wading man in "Gifts of Rain", the poet is "hooped to where he planted", earthed, his own people's current running through him as if giving and receiving were part of the same sustaining process. From the moment the old divisions in Ulster were violently reopened,

> the problems of poetry moved from being simply a matter of achieving a satisfactory verbal icon to being a search for images and symbols adequate to our predicament. (*Preoccupations*, p.56)

This search, "hunting the pluck" of adequate symbols, led him to the myth and history of the Vikings, and here he pursues the concept of an "archetypal pattern" (*Preoccupations*, p.57) connecting current conditions in Northern Ireland with those of ancient Scandinavian life he first discovered in "The Tollund Man" in *Wintering Out*.

The critical reception which *North* has received is also divided. While many praise its "panoptic vision" and widely-embracing myth, others see the poet's use of myth as a way of evading the issues which confront his

society.[2] But *North* seems to me neither "panoptic" nor "evasive", but genuinely exploratory. As Heaney continues to test and investigate the "archetypal pattern" he posits, he finds that it complicates rather than simplifies his often-conflicting responses to his land, his people and his poetry. He discovers he can find no symbol or framework which will prove convincingly "adequate to" the "condition" of life in Ulster. Once again, what seemed to be an answer turns out to raise further questions, and the tantalizing prize of a clear and unencumbered view remains out of reach. Heaney finds himself turned around, sometimes even taken back to where he started, as he gradually discovers that the tight analogy, the parallel lines, do not provide the way forward that they seemed to promise. But that discovery itself takes him forward. By the end of the book he has completed a wide circle, to end up feeling alone again, doubting the value and purpose of his enterprise in "Exposure". Yet the process of searching and circling repeated all through the volume is itself a process of exposure, and it becomes clear that throughout *North* he seeks the kind of timelessness caught so beautifully in the two dedicatory poems.

## I

Many of the poems in *North* are longer and more complex in movement than the short lyric form Heaney favoured in his earlier volumes, and an

---

[2]The initial reception *North* received was also mixed. Among reviewers who praised the "symbolic" Part I were Douglas Dunn, "Manana is Now," *Encounter*, Nov. 1975, pp.76-81; Richard Murphy, "Poetry and Terror," *New York Review of Books*, 30 Sept. 1976, pp.38-40; and Terry Eagleton, "New Poetry," *Stand*, 17, No. 1 (1976), 76-8. Others preferred Part II, where the subject is more directly and "explicitly" the North of Ireland; see for example Alan Brownjohn, "The Nub," *New Statesman*, 11 July 1975, p.59; Peter Washington, "Doleful," *Spectator*, 6 Sept. 1975, pp.314-5; and William Pritchard, "More Poetry Matters," *Hudson Review*, 29 (1976), 453-63.

important feature of this work is the dynamic interplay between different poems as the poet's imagination circles around and tests the patterns he looks to for comfort. This may be illustrated by an examination of three poems which pursue the Viking analogy, "Funeral Rites", "North" and "Viking Dublin: Trial Pieces". "Funeral Rites" explores the poet's experience of the human need to formalize grief and fear in the face of death. The poem gradually moves away from the speaker's direct encounters with the dead to explore the matter through literature and mythology, ending with an imaginary death of an imaginary hero. Yet these ways of opening up the subject can also act as shields against an intolerable reality. The speaker acknowledges that a ritual sign of his "manhood", his shouldering the coffins of dead relations, was deceptive, and that on such occasions he "shouldered a kind of manhood" only: the passive and submissive dead, with "wrists/obediently sloped" and unresisting "dough-white hands/shackled in rosary beads", offer no challenge to youthful courage. "Now", however, death is no longer reserved for the wrinkled old, and the words "neighbourly murder" jar against each other, suggesting that the need for consoling rituals is more urgent:

> Now as news comes in
> of each neighbourly murder
> we pine for ceremony,
> customary rhythms:
>
> the temperate footsteps
> of a cortège, winding past
> each blinded home.

Familiar rituals that once seemed "adequate" (the candles, shrouds and rosary beads of Catholic funerals) are found, like the declining practices of drawn blinds and processions on foot, to be too "temperate" for the times. "Blinded" by their grief, unable to see why these deaths had to happen, the

families of the dead are helpless, and while the poet shares in the communal sense of loss, he looks for consolation beyond the confines of their sorrow, and conceives of an alternative, more triumphant funeral along the lines of majestic burial rituals that pre-date the arrival of either Christianity or the English. He "would restore/the great chambers" of the Boyne Valley, those huge passage-tombs which still remain a testimony to an ancient civilization whose response to death was far from "temperate", their "megalithic doorway[s]" like those through which, in Viking legend, slain warriors entered Valhoel.[3]

While the words "I would restore" admit both a desire to reinstate the ancient tumuli to their former use and dignity and a will to make restitution, they also express uncertainty as to what restitution could be made for "each neighbourly murder". The conditional suggests that the speaker's exact feelings are unclear or mixed; and as he imagines a present-day version of an ancient ritual, trying to certify human continuity by binding the present to the past, he finds as much comfort in the full sounds and stately movement of the lines as in the "triumph" and grandeur of the ceremony described.

> the whole country tunes
> to the muffled drumming
>
> of ten thousand engines.
> Somnambulant women,
> left behind, move
> through emptied kitchens
>
> imagining our slow triumph
> towards the mounds.

---

[3]"The larger Irish passage tombs are among the most splendid and awe-inspiring of the monuments of prehistory in Western Europe. . . . The technical mastery exhibited in their construction, the artistic decoration on their stones and the very scale of the structures point unmistakably to the existence of complex and prosperous communities . . ." F.H.A. Aalen, *Man and the Landscape in Ireland* (London: Academic Press, 1978), p.56.

This imagined funeral procession that winds like a serpent through the countryside is in its own way as detached from death's finality and negation as the memory of the wakes in the first part of the poem; but there the image of the "serpent" as a "glacier", withholding consolation as it "pushed away" from the house, conveys something of the chilling reality of death absent in the later, trance-like vision.

This vision has been read as evidence that "Heaney himself has lost faith in the symbols of the traditional Catholic wake and burial".[4] But the poet finds the "customary rhythms" of Part I unsatisfactory because as part of the fabric of a "feud[ing]" society (Ulster Protestants, too, have their own "customary rhythms") they reinforce, as well as respond to, that divisiveness. Heaney turns to the past in search of the long view, like Yeats in "A Prayer for my Daughter",[5] and "pine[s] for ceremony" which will emphasize what is common to all societies—the kind of rituals which Vico called "fellowships of humanity" and "compacts of the human race".[6] For such ceremonies proclaim the human value of the deceased above considerations of any social or political order: it no longer matters what the dead person did in life—what "side" he belonged to, in what form his "manhood" manifested itself. In Hegel's words, the act of burial, the "ultimate ethical act . . . does not concern the citizen . . . [but] takes him as a universal being".[7] The poem describes this time of acceptance as a hiatus, with

---

[4]Arthur E. McGuinness, " 'Hoarder of the Common Ground': Tradition and Ritual in Seamus Heaney's Poetry," *Eire-Ireland*, 13, No. 2 (1978), 90.
[5]W.B. Yeats, *Collected Poems* (London: Macmillan, 1977), p.211.
[6]Giambattista Vico, *The New Science*, trans. Thomas Goddard Bergin & Max Harold Fisch (Ithaca Cornell Univ. Press, 1975), p.55.
[7]G.W.F. Hegel, *The Phenomonology of Mind*, trans. J.B. Baillie (New York: Harper & Row, 1967), pp.472 and 470.

> the cud of memory
> allayed for once, arbitration
> of the feud placated . . .

Yet pushing against the poem's imagining of a grander ceremony which transcends sectarian divisions is a recognition here of "memory" as a "cud" which may be "allayed". This odd metaphor seems to suggest that what people have swallowed (or what they have been fed) has been a source of nourishment, but these memories also have the confessedly unattractive habit of being continually regurgitated and chewed over in order to be digested, so that the best that can be imagined is a temporary respite, or propitiation: "arbitration/of the feud placated."

The speaker "would restore" not only the great burial chambers of the past, but also the great heroes; he offers a picture of Gunnar, a hero of *Njal's Saga* who refused to accept the sentence of outlaw in his own land, and whose subsequent murder in his home was widely condemned.[8] Though the parallels with the victims of "each neighbourly murder" are clear, the poem's ending on this note leaves real life suspended in the act of imagining. Henry Hart claims that "from the *Saga*'s anonymous author, writing around 1280 of the chronic feuding among Iceland's Norsemen, Heaney garners sobering lessons for his own bellicose culture seven hundred years later", and that when he refers to the Saga he "does so to renounce its epic pretensions."[9] But "Funeral Rites" itself is a way of imagining the pain and confusion "placated" along with the feud, rather than a discovery won out of despair in the face of "each neighbourly murder". Something of the defeated, passive aspect of "pin[ing]" pervades

---

[8]*Njal's Saga*, trans. Magnus Magnusson and Hermann Palsson (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1960).

[9]"History, Myth, and Apocalypse in Seamus Heaney's *North*," *Contemporary Literature*, 30, No. 3 (1989), 395.

the poem, so that by the final section even the rhythms proclaim a kind of sing-song inertia: "the cud of memory/allayed for once, arbitration/of the feud placated . . .". And the pressure of reality (of Heaney's "own bellicose culture") decreases as the poet, too, relies on "the cud of memory" to retrieve the consolatory image of heroic Gunnar,

> who lay beautiful
> inside his burial mound,
> though dead by violence
>
> and unavenged.

Looking to ceremony and ritual as a way of responding to reality turns out to provide the poet with a way of escaping from it. The "violence" here is not particularized, and this description of an "unavenged" death gives no weight to the "violence" such vengeance would entail. Thus Gunnar, "chanting/verses about honour . . . as he turned/with a joyful face/to look at the moon", changes from being a consolatory image *for* Heaney to become an ironic image *of* the poet himself "chanting" these "verses", with all those words' implications of repetition and recitation. By the end of "Funeral Rites" he is confronted by the realization that to "look at the moon", like Gunnar, is to look away from, rather than to face, the complexities of life in a "feud[ing]" society.

While Heaney "pines for ceremony" he does not want to be guilty of the fault that Dr. Johnson found with the metaphysical poets, when he claimed that they "wrote rather as beholders than partakers of human nature."[10] He therefore pursues his central idea in the next poem, "North", in the hope of finding some guidance on how best to partake in the distressing, contingent realities. "North" follows on from "Funeral

---

[10]Samuel Johnson, *Lives of the English Poets*, Vol. I, ed. John Hardy (London: Oxford University Press, 1968), p.14.

Rites" not merely in the sense that it is consecutive. It begins "I returned" (from the imaginative flight that led to Gunnar's tomb, to terra firma):

> I returned to a long strand,
> the hammered shod of a bay,
> and found only the secular
> powers of the Atlantic thundering.
>
> I faced the unmagical
> invitations of Iceland . . .

Receptive to and even consciously seeking inspiration from the Viking past, the poet's mind is turned towards their mythology (the "hammered shod" and the "thundering" ocean remind us of Thor) as his body faces Iceland. He senses that here, due North of Ulster, is a cardinal point for his understanding, but the "magical" and unexpected vision such as Gunnar's "joyful" acceptance of his destiny cannot be summoned to order, and the "triumph" of the funeral is now a faded dream. He finds only "secular/powers", which exclude or are sceptical of the mysterious and sacred: a secular, enduring perspective sees the "pathetic" as well as the magnificent aspects of history.

Perhaps it is the process of facing these "unmagical" perceptions, not shrinking from or distorting them, that brings about the change, as "suddenly" the poet hears "ocean-deafened voices" of "those fabulous" Viking "raiders". Heaney realizes that a fable is a fiction rather than a history, and that it is imagined in order to make a point or convey a lesson, and here the Viking story has a "warning" for the poet. It reminds him that romantic, unhistorical visions of the past are an illusion, a way of avoiding life rather than a way into it, as the ancient "tongue" of the Vikings describes their life in "unmagical" rather than heroic terms:

> . . . Thor's hammer swung
> to geography and trade,
> thick-witted couplings and revenges,
>
> the hatred and behindbacks
> of the althing, lies and women,
> exhaustions nominated peace,
> memory incubating the spilled blood.

Critics note that this description could well apply to Ulster—the conjunction of "lies and women" even suggesting to one commentator that "Heaney may be thinking of Bernadette Devlin and other women in the civil rights battles of the sixties and early seventies"!(Hart, p.306) The important point is that these lines seem to make the kind of judgment Magnus Magnusson passes on Gunnar's story: "Ultimately, there is an indictment of violence, and of the way of life that fostered it. Behind the rather wistful vision of past heroism lies recognition of the endless strife it provoked."[11]

In paralleling Iceland and Ulster, Heaney seeks to find a way he might live with the hatred and violence in his own world, but the advice of "The longship's swimming tongue" makes a distinction between life as an artist, and as a social being. "Lie down/in the word-hoard", it says, advising receptiveness and suggestibility, but also passivity and even retreat. "Compose in darkness", it counsels, implying that there will be no illumination beyond the act of composition itself, and thus discrediting the value of its own wisdom (as well as any other the poet might hear). "Trust the feel of what nubbed treasure/your hands have known" advises a poem which itself sacrifices concreteness and texture to abstraction. These suggestions are a product of the poet's own "furrowed brain", and it is not clear how, if he is to "compose in darkness", he will be able to "Keep

---

[11]Introduction, *Njal's Saga*, p.27.

[his] eye clear/as the bleb of the icicle". It is as if he relishes the words "the bleb of the icicle" for their sound and image more than their power to suggest what that kind of clear-sightedness might mean. How might its opposite be imagined, for example—as a muddiness, a kind of visual fingering of slime, perhaps?

Facing "North", then, proves to be no simple solution to the poet's difficulty, but in "Viking Dublin: Trial Pieces" he makes a flexible attempt to shift the relationship between his immediate and his imaginative resources by exploring the "North" analogy further. The different sections of this poem are offered as "trial pieces", experimental attempts rather than polished artefacts; but the title includes the idea that the poet is putting himself on trial, and these offerings serve both to accuse and defend him. Specifically, the title refers to practice carvings on bits of bone, many samples of which have been discovered among the Viking remains in Dublin.

Following the child who he thinks of as untroubled by a sense of responsibility or by a pre-conceived pattern when he incised the original lines on a "trial piece", Heaney proceeds by instinct and intuition, discovering his subject in the process of creating it, his lines unfolding as if language were propelled by some energy of its own, "eluding the hand/that fed it". The focus narrows and widens almost at whim: like the outline on the piece of bone, the poem is "a cage/or trellis to conjure in". Thus the poet's attention, at first refined to a minute detail—a shape that reminds him of a nostril—widens as the nostril becomes a prow, yet retains the particular powers of a nostril as it "sniff[s]" its way to its final resting place in Dublin. While the ship intently discovers its course and destination by following its nose, it appears to be carefree, "swanning it

up" the river Liffey without any serious or sinister motive. But appearances deceive, and no line proceeds without direction. Within Heaney's open and experimental fluidity is an awareness that the line traced by the "migrant prow", however "amazing", did not come to a stop in Dublin purely by chance; and the poet's language finds him giving weight not to the tale he wants to tell (of the Vikings as early settlers, founders of Dublin, initiators of trade), but to an image of duplicity or deceit, of the boat "dissembling itself", in that "swanning" movement, its true character hidden behind its civilizing and trading activities. Again, the image of the boat's keel coming to rest in the riverbank "like a long sword/sheathed in its/moisting burial clays" also contains suggestions of violence, penetration and purpose.

In time the line seems to turn back on itself, as the Viking raiders are themselves raided: "And now we reach in/for shards of the vertebrae" and other treasures, including the "trial piece" that inspired the poem, the carving of "a longship, a buoyant/migrant line". Something of that lightness of spirit enlivens these lines (so different from the un-buoyant character of "The longship's swimming tongue" in "North") as the poem moves into its fourth section, where the child's "longship" enters the poet's "longhand", as if he were cross-fertilized over time. A sense of invasion by the earlier creative experiment gives rise to the idea of Hamlet as a kind of objective correlative, and the poem entertains the idea and even plays with the pretension of entertaining it—"a worm of thought/I follow into the mud". As Heaney explores the parallels in a "buoyant" attempt at self-definition, he finds that there is more than "a smack of Hamlet" in him, and the tone of this discovery, teetering

between playful self-mockery and sober self-assessment, looks forward to the sustained self-scrutiny of "Station Island":

> I am Hamlet the Dane,
> skull-handler, parablist,
> smeller of rot
>
> in the state, infused
> with its poisons,
> pinioned by ghosts
> and affections,
>
> murders and pieties,
> coming to consciousness
> by jumping in graves,
> dithering, blathering.

Like Hamlet, the poet considers himself "pinioned", incapable of action and therefore of imaginative flight; feeling inadequate in his response to his historical moment, he dismisses his thoughtful questioning as mere "dithering", his words as empty "blathering". He recognizes that he is not immune to the "rot" he can smell out there "in the state", but is "infused with its poisons"; concerned with clarifying issues in his own mind, he doubts his capacity to set the times to rights.

And so do many of his critics. Edna Longley disparages *North*'s "punctilious patterning . . . system, homogenisation" (p.161), which she sees as steering the poetry in a single direction, and dismissses the Vikings as "costume drama imports" (p.158). Seamus Deane similarly remarks that "Viking myths do not correspond to Irish experience without some fairly forceful straining."[12] As the pictures of Nordic society in "North" and in the fifth "trial piece" of "Viking Dublin" suggest, the myths do not exactly "correspond" to the society that spawned them, either:

---

[12]*Celtic Revivals: Essays in Modern Irish Literature 1880-1980*, (London: Faber and Faber, 1985), p.179.

> neighbourly, scoretaking
> killers, haggers
> and hagglers, gombeen-men,
> hoarders of grudges and gain.

Heaney himself is not completely convinced by his myth. While in part he responds to and delights in the creative freedom to follow a line, calling the reader to "Come fly with me", in part he rejects such freedom as a flight from the truth. The Vikings are reverently invoked ("Old fathers, be with us./Old cunning assessors . . .") in language that recalls Stephen Dedalus in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* as well as Yeats's introduction to *Responsibilities*:

> *Pardon, old fathers . . .*
> *Pardon that for a barren passion's sake*
> *. . . I have nothing but a book,*
> *Nothing but that to prove your blood and mine.*
> (*Collected Poems*, p.113)

So while on the one hand, following the "bill in flight" suggests a flight into creativity, on the other, there is a doubt that such a course would lead the explorer away from the horrors and brutality; rather, it might lead him into the heart of them, unchanged over centuries.

Heaney's mixed responses here seem to suggest that while history may be regarded as an encumbrance, it cannot easily be dispensed with. Though Joyce took flight, his subject-matter remained rooted in Ireland; and Heaney's own understanding of Ireland's long history of "feuds" and "ambushes" affects the way he experiences the world. In the final section of the poem he turns once again to Synge—this time via *Hamlet*—to "try" his own solemn compounding of past and present barbarity against the untroubled ease with which Jimmy Farrell in Synge's play, *The Playboy of the Western World*, "compounded history". For the "buoyant" Jimmy, the past matters less than the present, and dead is dead: he has no difficulty believing that the skull of a recent victim could be taken for that

of "an old Dane,/maybe, was drowned/in the Flood". But for Heaney this "compounding" habit of mind is, like the outline on the child's piece of bone, both "cage and trellis": it provides a structure within which to understand these issues, and a framework on which that understanding can grow and find support; but at the same time it impedes exploratory freedom or creative flight, setting the mind in fixed attitudes and pre-ordained patterns. By the end of the poem, however, Heaney has come around in a circle, and the exploration of language once more resembles the Viking "child's tongue/following the toils/of his calligraphy". The exploratory tongue has discovered "pampooties", and with a combination of enjoyment and display adds it to the poet's "word-hoard". Testing, tasting, and relishing, the poet's "words lick around/cobbled quays" and "go hunting/lightly as pampooties/over the skull-capped ground": the pattern of Heaney's movement, far from being "punctilious" or "homogenis[ed]", is "by indirections [to] find directions out" (*Hamlet*, II, iv, l.175).

II

The exploratory form of the poems I have been discussing—"Funeral Rites", "North" and "Viking Dublin: Trial Pieces"—suggest how the poet's words "go hunting", following the unpredictable wriggle of a "worm of thought" even if it leads him "into the mud". At its best, Heaney's poetry catches the circling of the poet's mind around his subject, showing him as being at once "pilot and stray". But there are moments in *North* when the poetry seems either to "stray" too loosely, and to be in need of a little more "pilot[ing]", or else to be almost too sure of where it is headed. A good example of both of these tendencies is "Kinship", which

follows the exploratory pattern of the poems discussed above, approaching the central idea from a variety of angles in an attempt to allow the separate but entangled responses to suggest their own significance. But much of the suggestiveness of the earlier poems has been left behind, as if Heaney is now using them like stepping stones, as a sort of short-cut through already-explored territory.

The opening lines assert the "kinship" between the speaker and "the strangled victim" as a fait accompli, the syntax having the effect of coupling the two irretrievably, pinning them together:

> Kinned by hieroglyphic
> peat on a spreadfield
> to the strangled victim,
> the love-nest in the bracken,
>
> I step . . .

Once again Heaney is relying on the ambiguities of language to suggest the complexity of relationships between past and present, but here it is not clear what he is gesturing towards. Why does he describe the peat as "hieroglyphic", for example? While the spade marks on peat might resemble the marks carved in stone, and the enigmatic, elusive quality of these marks imply that the bog's meaning is not readily accessible, the word "hieroglyphic", so closely associated with ancient Egypt, seems foreign to Heaney's range of imagery in the rest of the poem. And what of "spreadfield", a word which seems to suggest its own meaning (a spread field) but which is unfamiliar? It turns out not to be a portmanteau word created by the poet; tucked away in the supplement to the O.E.D.(2f), it is defined as "an expansion in a (middle-aged) person's girth", used to refer to "an older woman, middle aged, with possibly, a spread"(!) The suggestion then, as in "Gifts of Rain", is of the landscape as female, a receptive consort, spreading and inviting the "victim" (and by implication

Heaney), into her "love-nest in the bracken". Is that "love-nest", like a Mayfair flat, reserved for secret, illicit sexual encounters, or is it the cosy cottage of newlyweds? And how do these ideas develop the concept of "kinship" which underpins *North*?

Because the imaginative energies seem to dart in such conflicting directions it is difficult to conceive of this opening stanza as deeply exploratory. And as the poem proceeds it does little to clarify or to open up the possibilities that Heaney is imagining:

> I step through origins
> like a dog turning
> its memories of wilderness
> on the kitchen mat . . .

The ability to "step through origins" is offered as painless, a kind of time-travel which, the tense implies, is habitual as well as easy (unlike the formulation "I would restore" in "Funeral Rites"). We might ask whether anybody can "step through origins"—if origins (linguistic or social) are a doorway to somewhere else. Where might you find yourself if you did "step through"? While this poem offers itself as "a long foray" into the questions that continue to crop up throughout the volume, much of it treads a ritual path of familiar imaginings. Like a "dog turning/its memories of wilderness/on the kitchen mat", the poet seems to be going through some motions he remembers from his past, as if his immediate need is to rely on habit, on "customary rhythms". When a dog encloses itself in a ring of its own making on the safe terrain of "the kitchen mat", it is not about to "go hunting" but to settle down to sleep, and there are long sections of this poem which seem to be on automatic pilot when compared to earlier venturings.

If we recall the lines from "Personal Helicon",

> I loved the dark drop, the trapped sky, the smells
> Of waterweed, fungus and dank moss . . .

we see how the poet's attraction to "slime" and the "dark drop" is something to be explored, whereas in "Kinship" it seems rehearsed, and "the cooped secrets/of process and ritual" are merely alluded to.

> I love the spring
> off the ground,
> each bank a gallows drop,
> each open pool
>
> the unstopped mouth
> of an urn, a moon drinker,
> not to be sounded
> by the naked eye.

The evocative "dark drop" of "Personal Helicon" has narrowed to the prescriptive "gallows drop". And "each open pool" is now explicitly the "mouth of an urn"—perhaps because it is shaped like that vessel, or perhaps to suggest that it preserves the remains of the dead (in which case the difference between ashes in an urn and bodies in a bog is infinitely greater than any similarity). Why is the bog pool "not to be sounded/by the naked eye", its depth not to be tested? Again the language here is more prescriptive than the suggestive ending of "Bogland" ("The wet centre is bottomless") and this prescription contrasts with the active embrace of a risk-taking "sounding" in "Gifts of Rain".

The sense that the poem seems to be writing itself is even stronger in the second section, where there is not a finite verb to be found: it consists of a list of apparently contradictory attributes of bogland, which is presented as both active and passive: both a receptacle and a fruitful source, it both consumes and is a feeding-place.

> Ruminant ground,
> digestion of mollusc
> and seed-pod,
> deep pollen bin.

As the listing becomes more and more inclusive, we get the impression of the speaker circling around the properties of the bog, as if he has lost sight of what he is searching for:

> Earth-pantry, bone-vault,
> sun-bank, enbalmer
> of votive goods
> and sabred fugitives.
>
> Insatiable bride.
> Sword-swallower,
> casket, midden,
> floe of history.

The feeling is not so much of an "insatiable bride" as of the insatiability of the poet, as he tries to retrieve something of the idea of expansion and contraction captured earlier in "Bogland". Images of preservation and destruction shoulder against each other, especially in the kennings: the "seed-pod" is also an "enbalmer", a "pantry" and even a "sword-swallower" (what has the trick of sword-swallowing, performed for entertainment or diversion, to do with the bog as an "insatiable bride"?) This list come to rest with a description of the bog as the "outback of my mind", suggesting an imagination so "stray" that it might benefit from some pilot-like scrutiny from the front of the mind.

Such scrutiny might be applied to the lines which recall the discovery of a turf-spade,

> hidden under bracken,
> laid flat, and overgrown
> with a green fog.

While the spade looks back to the poet's origins, recalling the poem "Digging", for instance, the imagination here is concerned less with exploring specific origins than with "step[ping] through" or transcending

them. So the simple act of picking up the spade and standing it upright in the ground to dry assumes a greater significance, as elsewhere on the bog an unspecified "they" perform a similar act: "they raise up/a cloven oak-limb", a souvenir of pre-historic times, like the "ash-fork staked in peat" described in "Nerthus" (*Wintering Out*, p.49). The relationship between the two acts is even closer than the "kinship" implied in the title: finding the spade is presented as the exact counterpart or "twin" of the discovery of an ancient symbol:

> And now they have twinned
> that obelisk . . .

In his "twinning" of past and present, Heaney is using bogland as a kind of shorthand, relying on the properties he has explored and articulated in previous poems, as if he feels no necessity to do that initial spadework again. The poem's suggestion, that since the ground that yields up the spade and the votive carving is one and the same, so a similar equation can be made between (his) present-day relationship to that ground and that of prehistoric times, has been the subject of some debate. Heaney has been reproached by a number of critics for drawing a tight parallel between contemporary Ulster and ancient barbarity. Many of his readers, especially in Ireland, regard the poetry's suggestion that Mother Ireland accepts the "victim" as her due as questionable, even deplorable, because of the attitudes and values this implies and even upholds. Sickened and disappointed by the tragic resurgence of violence in Northern Ireland, they turn away from any response to the conflict which they conceive to be aggrandizing or ennobling, for they realize how such

fictitious beliefs have fuelled the destruction.[13] They struggle to establish a way of responding in which mythic extremes have no part, a rational, rather than a poetic way.

Critics such as Carson and Seamus Deane[14] regard Heaney's learning and background as tools to shape and control the world, rather than a source or resource through which meaning might be discovered. They see him as a cultural representative, a position which entails responsibility. And in parts of *North* Heaney's voice does sound more public than private. The "I" who "found a turf-spade" at the opening of this section of "Kinship" modulates into a larger, more representative "I" by the end—an I/eye that focuses not on the immediate and tactile ("trust the feel of what nubbed treasure/your hands have known") but on a remote abstraction. When the speaker stands "at the edge of centuries/facing a goddess" there is no sense of a person who feels "in between" anything. It is as if he has his back turned to the pressures of the present, accepting without question concepts of the "goddess" and her "love-nest".

But true "kinship" cannot be established when so much has been left out of the reckoning, and the poem as a whole is less than confident in the parallels it seems to insist on, for example, in its fourth section: "*This* centre holds . . ." [my emphasis]. Heaney is accused of a determinism

---

[13]See for example G.F. Dalton, "The Tradition of Blood Sacrifice to the Goddess Eire," *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review* 63, No. 252 (974), 343-354. The influence of this tradition on modern Irish writers, including Heaney, is traced by Patrick Keane in *Terrible Beauty: Yeats, Joyce, Ireland and the Myth of the Devouring Female* (Columbia: Missouri Univ. Press, 1988.)

[14]Carson describes Heaney as "a laureate of violence, a mythmaker, an anthropologist of ritual killing" in "Escaped from the Massacre?," *Honest Ulsterman* 50 (1975), p.183. And see especially Deane's interview with Heaney, "Unhappy and at home", p.62, where Heaney's efforts to address these questions obliquely are repeatedly foiled, as Deane steers him to "adopt a political stance" on the grounds that not to do so is to render himself irrelevant, limited and even inauthentic.

which subtly legitimates the violence in his own country.[15] But in some sense he does feel like a "victim", whose only way of "coming to consciousness" is by a "dithering, blathering" descent into the "grave" of the bog, whose characteristic swampiness allows for it to be both an amniotic sac—a place of new growth—and a cesspit :

> sump and seedbed,
> a bag of waters
>
> and a melting grave.

In the act of following these ideas through in his poetry, Heaney is not simply articulating where he stands; he is figuring himself in the process of composing (becoming) the person he is composing (creating or establishing) in his art. Like the bog itself, he is constantly changing, and it is difficult to pin down the essence of his poetry when it resembles

> a windfall composing
> the floor it rots into.

This process is not one-directional: it is not so easy to make gains. In "Kinship", by the fifth section the result of turning the same material round and round is that circles appear everywhere, but seem to lead nowhere: the felloes or outer circles of wheels on a turf-cart, which are a means of turning things around and moving them forward, also prove to be a way of keeping them static, for they are

> buried in a litter
> of turf mould . . .

This turf-cart is described in detail that approaches reverence, so it comes as no surprise to hear the speaker proclaim that he

---

[15]E.g, "H[eaney's] allusions to former cultures amount to a sort of historical determinism." Blake Morrison, "Speech and Reticence in Seamus Heaney's *North*," in *British Poetry since 1970: A Critical Survey*, ed. Peter Jones and Michael Schmidt (Manchester: Carcanet, 1980), p.110.

> . . . deified the man
> who rode there.

We think of the admiration for the skill of Heaney's father and grandfather in "Digging", and of the child's (Hamlet-like) worship of his father in "Follower" (*Death of a Naturalist*, p.24), conveyed through his way of seeing him—"His shoulders globed like a full sail . . .". Here, however, the deification is spelt out:

> god of the waggon,
> the hearth-feeder.

If "the man/who rode there" is not a god, he is at least a knight. In "Digging" the son recalls carrying to his father "milk in a bottle/Corked sloppily with paper". The precise detail of the earlier poem has become stylized, even glamorized:

> I was his privileged
> attendant, a bearer
> of bread and drink,
> the squire of his circuits.

And "his circuits" are simply referred to, in contrast to "Digging" where the father's work-rhythm is caught in the rhythms of the poem:

> . . . He straightened up
> To drink it, then fell to right away
> Nicking and slicing neatly, heaving sods
> Over his shoulder . . .

With his mind on large-scale issues rather than on particularities, Heaney seems to rely on abstraction, mistrusting the power of concrete imagery, and looking beyond his own confused responses to the problems that surround him. At the end of the poem he turns, almost in desperation, to Tacitus, whose description of the Suebi nation strikes a chord: these people "share a common worship of Nerthus, or Mother Earth. They believe that she takes part in human affairs, riding in a

chariot among her people".[16] Tacitus describes a "grove", located "in an island of the sea", which was "the centre of their whole religion" and was "regarded as the cradle of the race and the dwelling place of the supreme god". Heaney has this passage in mind:

> And you, Tacitus
> observe how I make my grove
> on an old crannog
> piled by the fearful dead . . .

In choosing the Irish word "crannog" rather than the more general word "island", Heaney is both asserting his sense of belonging and expressing the difficulties of writing from within that position. (A crannog is an artificial island, constructed mainly of wood piled up and staked into the bottom of a lake—an ancient, defensive form of settlement, distinctively Irish.[17]) His interest in Tacitus is not simply that the Roman historian recorded the cult of Nerthus and the barbarity he witnessed, but in his *manner* of recording it. Writing on this subject in 1972, Heaney explained:

> It seemed to me that there are satisfactory imaginative parallels between this religion and time and our own time. They are observed with amazement and a kind of civilized tut-tut by Tacitus in the first century A.D. and by leader-writers in the *Daily Telegraph* in the 20th century.[18]

Heaney's rendering of these "parallels" cannot claim the distance or the "civilized tut-tut" of either Tacitus or English journalists—nor does it wish to; he calls on Tacitus to "observe" the differences in their perspectives: Heaney writes as an insider, but Tacitus wrote in a Roman setting, for a Roman audience, about foreign practices. Acknowledging Tacitus' claim to impartiality, Heaney invites him to "come back" from

---

[16]Tacitus, *The Agricola and The Germania*, trans. H. Mattingly, revised S.A. Handford (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970), pp.134-5.
[17]Peter Harbison, *The Archeology of Ireland* (London: The Bodley Head, 1976), pp.69-75.
[18]"Mother Ireland," *Listener*, 7 December 1972, p.790.

the dead "to this/'island of the ocean' " (Ireland) and, like a Recording Angel, "report us fairly":

> Read the inhumed faces
>
> . . . of casualty and victim.

What are the plain facts, such as Tacitus prided himself on presenting without prejudice? Are the descriptions of the bog as "love-nest" marked by "obelisk[s]"—as "sun-bank, enbalmer/of votive goods", as "the vowel of earth/dreaming its root/in flowers and snow"—are these descriptions nullified by conflicting or opposing images of "the slime kingdoms,/ domains of the cold-blooded"? What kind of fair report can accommodate the concept of a "mother ground", a "love-nest", which yet "is sour with the blood/of her faithful"? The repetition of "sour" here recalls the earlier lines, "The mothers of autumn/sour and sink", and the suggestion of fermentation modulates into a more grotesque image by the end of the poem, where "the faithful"

> . . . lie gargling
> in her sacred heart
> as the legions stare
> from the ramparts.

If the reward for fidelity is slaughter, a drowning in blood or bogwater, how can any "report" be "fair"? The reporter's own experience—his own interests and emotions and prejudices—are operating as he selects and relates what he sees.

Tacitus records how Roman legions "stare[d]/from the ramparts" at the Britons while the rhetoric of their leaders stirred them into violence, telling them that they slaughtered for the common good—while the Britons, in turn, were fortified and urged to resist by the rhetoric of their leaders. Heaney's words "a desolate peace" refer specifically to the rhetorical use of language in Tacitus' account of the Roman invasion of

Britain (*Agricola*, Chapter 30), where Calgacus sums up the achievement of the Romans: "To robbery, butchery, and rapine, they give the lying name of government; they create a desolation, and call it peace" (p.81). Calgacus uses rhetoric to rouse the Britons to resist oppression (rhetoric was traditionally used for persuasion), but the epigram also works in another way—to interpret. The Romans call their domination of the Britons "peace" in order to justify their actions; by calling it "desolation", Calgacus is repudiating their claim, and with it the legitimacy of their power. Heaney is very conscious that language is not a neutral tool, and of the closeness between interpretation and persuasion to action. And he mistrusts his own rhetoric, seeing the peace of his own "inviolate grove" of poetry as desolate: while he rejects the role of representative spokesman, he feels an obligation, both as a poet and member of a community, to express his thoughts and feelings about legitimate government in his country.

To complicate things further, the famous words he refers to are not, strictly speaking, the words of Calgacus. Despite Tacitus' disclaimer of any personal interest as he introduces the speech—"This is the substance of what he [Calgacus] is reported to have said" (p.79), the fact that these words are ultimately Tacitus' own gives them an undercutting power: this is an anti-imperialist statement created by Tacitus in a Roman setting and for a Roman audience. Where then does he stand—is he as impartial as he presents himself, or is he just as equivocal as Heaney?

Thus "Kinship" ends not with a contrast between Tacitus and Heaney, but with their complicit understanding that any version of human history is partial, and the realization that while contradictory forces locked into each other issue in futility, a vacuum of forces (the absence of decisive

action or policy) also leads to futility: "nothing will suffice". Heaney and his critics are not so much at odds after all, as the end of all his exploring in this poem is to question the "kinship" it set out to establish.

III

It is not enough, then, to represent Heaney's relationship to the tragedy of Ireland as "fixed and ordained",[19] for the poetry in *North* pivots and turns, changing its mind and its angles of approach, as Heaney attempts to understand and explore that relationship. While he sees that a mythic approach to these questions can be regarded as an insult to the rational human mind, he also sees that it can offer a sustaining vision of mankind's possibilities. And the poetry does not simply present his notions of "kinship" between different times and societies, it tests them out, discovering in the process where they hold strong, and where they fall short. This can be seen in the three poems that follow "Kinship"—"Ocean's Love to Ireland", "Aisling" and "Act of Union"—where Heaney returns to the metaphor of Ireland as a female, to reconsider the idea, explored earlier in "Traditions", of her penetration by a male England. An *aisling* is a "vision poem", a genre that flourished in 18th century Ireland, in which the true ("hidden") Ireland, "so dark, so scorned, yet so secretly romantic," appears to the poet, usually "as a majestic or radiant maiden", who recalls a glorious Gaelic past until "the lines fall . . . into the bitterness of earnestness as soon as the one root-sorrow is reached—the Gael in bondage, his land in the grip of an alien."[20] So in these poems Heaney is turning to distinctly Irish traditions; but he also writes into

---

[19]Conor Cruise O'Brien, "A Slow North-East Wind," *Listener*, 25 September 1975, p.405.
[20]Daniel Corkery, *The Hidden Ireland: A Study of Gaelic Munster in the Eighteenth Century* (Dublin: M.H. Gill & Son, 1925), pp. xix, 128, 140.

them English literary and classical allusions. Here again we see how Heaney's openness to contradictory forces—that registering of the perplexity yet centredness of being "in between"—can be a source of great richness. At the same time, it can be seen as something to hide behind, and he has been accused of slipperiness and ambivalence; as Edna Longley asks, "Can the poet run with the hare . . . and hunt with the hounds?" (p.154). But Heaney's readers are not the only ones who are troubled by this question: he himself explores it in these poems, which test the very concepts of impartiality and truth, as in his call to Tacitus to "report us fairly". How do we identify the position of the writer who is reporting fairly? Is a metaphoric account or interpretation fairer than a historical one?

The title of "Ocean's Love to Ireland" is a consciously ironic reference to Ralegh's poem "The Ocean to Cynthia". Taking a famous episode from John Aubrey's *Brief Lives* and connecting it with accounts of Ralegh's invasion of Ireland on behalf of the Crown, the poem personifies Erin as a maid and presents Ralegh's invasion as an assault on her "honour". Aubrey describes how Ralegh "loved"

> a wench well; and one time getting one of the Mayds of Honour up against a tree in a Wood ('twas his first Lady) who seemed at first boarding to be something fearfull of her Honour, and modest, she cryed, sweet Sir Walter, what doe you me ask? Will you undoe me? Nay, sweet Sir Walter! Sweet Sir Walter! At last, as the danger and the pleasure at the same time grew higher, she cryed in the extasey, Swisser Swatter Swisser Swatter. She proved with child, and I doubt not but this Hero tooke care of them both, as also that the Product was more than an ordinary mortal.[21]

It is clear that Heaney does not share Aubrey's view of Ralegh as "Hero", and recognizes violation where Aubrey, carried away by admiration, can

---

[21]Oliver Lawson Dick ed., *Aubrey's Brief Lives* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1962), p.318.

see no wrong. But what exactly is Heaney's view—does he in this poem "report" the story "fairly"? He presents Ralegh "driv[ing] inland"

> **Till all her strands are breathless:**
> **'Sweesir, Swatter! Sweesir, Swatter!'**

Aubrey, like Ralegh, paid no heed to the maid's clearly-articulated plea, "Will you undoe me?", but found a touch of piquancy in her inarticulate, semi-coherent outburst, which can be interpreted as an expression of distress at least as readily as it can an expression of "extasey". And Heaney presents some complicity in the complacent, Mens'-Club mentality of Aubrey. There is little resistance in this poem to Aubrey's interpretation of the maid's cries: only one word, "breathless", is ascribed to her, and it hardly operates in her defence, or to suggest that the assault deprived her of the capacity to respond at the same time as it deprived her of her "honour".

Edna Longley makes the point that this poem "overworks phallic symbolism" (p.157). But there is a deeper reason for discriminating between "Ocean's Love to Ireland" and Heaney's best work. The poem suggests that all of Ireland's male contacts have "failed her": she was let down not only by "this Hero" Ralegh, but by the "Spanish prince" sent by the Pope, and also by the Irish Lord Deputy at the time, Arthur Grey, who massacred the garrison at Smerwick, recognizing that these were "as gallant and good/Personages as ever were beheld" (if *his* account is to be taken at face value). And the concluding section suggests that while these outsiders have "failed her", so have her own *aisling* poets including, presumably, Heaney himself.

> The ruined maid complains in Irish,
> Ocean has scattered her dream of fleets,
> The Spanish prince has spilled his gold
>
> And failed her. Iambic drums
> Of English beat the woods where her poets
> Sink like Onan.

Irish poets' inward-turned preoccupation with the romantic myth (the barefoot, ringleted maid of the woods) has lost them their grip on the real Ireland which is being hunted out by England: "her poets/Sink like Onan". Is onanistic self-indulgence a greater crime than aggressive and destructive self-indulgence?

> . . . her poets
> Sink like Onan. Rush-light, mushroom-flesh,
>
> She fades from their somnolent clasp
> Into ringlet-breath and dew,
> The ground possessed and repossessed.

These lines suggest that "her poets", self-absorbed or dazed ("somnolent") rather than actively engaged, do nothing to help prevent (or avenge?) the maid's "undoing", and are therefore implicated in her repeated "possess[ion]" by the invader. But this affirmation of the futility and even moral irresponsibility of lyric poetry is not made as a forthright ideological statement: it is couched in the language and imagery of the kind of poetry it criticizes, implying an appreciation of it, and alignment with it. After all, attachment to a particular terrain might give rise to a stirring vision as well as to a chanting, romantic dream.

But the *aisling* poet's art is gauged by his music rather than his content. Daniel Corkery explains, "They do not move us, they dazzle us. Or if one is moved at all by them, it is not by or for the Cause they sing. . . . The words live in their sounds, not in their sense; it is the subtle, irresistible witchcraft of their music, and not what they say, that steals away the

listeners' brains".[22] This raises questions about whether Heaney's poetry is backward-looking and "onanistic", questions explored further in the short poem that follows, called "Aisling", which asks whether the "sweet" art of aisling poetry is "decadent", and even voyeuristic. The poet who "courted" a vision expresses uncertainty as to her goddess-status: " 'Are you Diana . . .?' ". And if she is a goddess, might the poet whose words "go hunting" be courting destruction by writing this kind of poetry? (The reference is to the hunter Actaeon who came upon the goddess bathing in the woods. She turned him into a stag and his own hounds tore him to pieces).

> And was he Actaeon,
> His high lament
> The stag's exhausted belling?

Of the many questions begged by the image of Ireland as a goddess, the one that most worries Heaney is whether it allows the poet to call the tune.

In the poem "Act of Union" the *aisling* genre is applied to a specific historical context. In 1801 the Act of Union joined Ireland to Britain to form a new United Kingdom, and Heaney's poem draws on the configuration of the two countries on the map to imagine an "imperially/Male" England describing his "act of union" with a female Ireland:

> Your back is a firm line of eastern coast
> . . .
> I am the tall kingdom over your shoulder . . .

The poem is written in the form of a dramatic monologue, allowing the reader to hear the speaker's account of what happened and, through the

---

[22]*The Hidden Ireland*, pp.133, 138. (Heaney remarks on how this book helped shape his vision in his interview with Helen O'Shea, p.15.)

recognition of the limits of that point of view, to apprehend the fuller picture. As Robert Langbaum points out in *The Poetry of Experience,* the dramatic monologue achieves its effect by pitting our sympathy with the speaker against our judgment of him, and holding them in tension.[23] In an attempt at Tacitus-like fairness, an attempt to pursue this exploration "without partiality or hatred",[24] Heaney gives the story to the male; after all, what could be fairer for the Irish poet than to adopt the English point of view? (This is a point I shall return to).

By beginning his account with a description of natural change, the speaker deliberately sets the scene for his presentation of the act of union as natural—"as if" it were as inevitable as cross-pollination or as flood following heavy rain.

> To-night, a first movement, a pulse,
> As if the rain in bogland gathered head
> To slip and flood: a bog-burst,
> A gash breaking open the ferny bed.

The implication of the earth being wounded in "gash" is not developed here. Ireland is not "backed to a tree", and she is neither protesting nor swooning. Her "arms and legs are thrown/Beyond [her] gradual hills" in a relaxed way. "I caress", he says, and speaks of "our past", as if the relationship were more like a marriage than a rape: these partners are on comfortable terms with each other and he trusts her because of her honesty—she "would neither cajole nor ignore" him.

But what kind of "union" is this? The "arms and legs thrown/Beyond" are not simply relaxed; there is a suggestion of indifference in that

---

[23]*The Poetry of Experience: The Dramatic Monologue in Modern Literary Tradition* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1974).

[24]A study of the genesis of this poem reveals Heaney's determination to integrate different ways of interpreting the event into his own representation of it. See the early worksheets reproduced in Arthur E. McGuinness, "The Craft of Diction: Revision in Seamus Heaney's Poems," *Irish University Review,* 9, No. 1 (1979), 62-91 (especially Appendix III).

sprawling posture. The ringleted, dew-fresh maid is nowhere present (but there may be a recollection of the "spreadfield"!) Who is the woman who participates in the act of union without interest; who will "neither cajole nor ignore"; who simply lies there as if the whole business meant nothing to her? Who else but the whore ("the ground possessed and repossessed")?

So the act is presented first as if it is a natural "caress", and then as if any opportunism on England's part is matched by Ireland's own opportunism: she accepts this embrace for her own purpose. Either way, the speaker implies, "I'm not guilty". But if we scrutinize this artful account, we find things that are unaccounted for. For example, the province is "heaving". If it is true that her body is not heaving with passion, then either the "heaving" is emotional, and the woman is sobbing (which gives the lie to her indifference or cynicism); or it refers to the physical rise and fall of a sleeping figure, whose back is turned figuratively as well as literally, and who is neither "cajoling" nor "ignoring" because she is not communicating at all: those arms and legs are thrown in the abandonment of sleep.

When is an act of union not an act of union? When one of the parties is unable or unwilling to participate. Or when it is the opposite of what it claims to be. "Sweet Sir Walter . . . will you *undoe* me?" asks the maid in Aubrey's anecdote. One implication here is that the Act of Union was Ireland's "undoing". Heaney presents England in a guise familiar to us—as an unfeeling rapist, who leaves this trial-by-poem unrepentant (she was there, it was inevitable, she did not fight, she had been invaded before anyway. . . ). He presents Ireland's undoing as not simply the act itself, but its "legacy", which "Culminates inexorably" with the increasing use of

war terms in the second part of the poem. To some extent that "legacy" was, in historian Roy Foster's terms, "the confessional divide that remained the structural reality of Irish politics".[25] Foster goes on to explain that the Act was seen as a "critical moment", in that different interpretations of it affected people's attitudes not only to later events, but to earlier ones:

> The Irish past, even the pre-Christian era, was enlisted into the argument [over the invalidity or necessity of Union]; throughout, the same events were read in diametrically opposite terms by Unionists and by Nationalists. (p.290)

Thus Heaney's poem, by presenting one point of view in such a way that it contains a "diametrically opposite" reading, attempts to heal that sense of divide which is part of his own personal legacy—it is a genuine attempt to "report fairly" and an attempt to use his public voice responsibly. But it is difficult if not impossible for someone "infused with" the "poisons" of such a legacy to decide impartially what is "rotten" in the state and what is sound. Perhaps the most persuasive part of the speaker's account is his affirmation that "Conquest is a lie", and the interpretation of the Act of Union as a simple act of "conquest" may be regarded as a "lie" for several reasons. First, because the Act was not foisted on Ireland willy-nilly: Oliver MacDonagh explains that while England certainly wanted it, both Protestants and Catholics in Ireland also favoured it: "Protestants swore that even a union would be preferable to equality with Catholics, while Catholics swore that even a union would be preferable to their continued degradation."[26] Secondly, to read the Act as "conquest" is a "lie" in the sense that instead of subjugating the people as

---

[25]R.F. Foster, *Modern Ireland 1600-1972* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1989), p.289.
[26]*States of Mind: A Study of Anglo-Irish Conflict 1780-1980* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1985), p.134.

intended, it backfired, locking the two countries in an arrangement where all future points of contact involve concessions and degrees of independence:

> . . . I grow older
> Conceding your half-independent shore
> Within whose borders now my legacy
> Culminates inexorably.

And "conquest" implies that one force subjugates another, but this Act created a new enemy whose "obstinate" and single-minded ambition to conquer the conqueror is proof that to interpret the original act as conquest is to be mistaken.

So if "conquest is a lie", what is the truth? By making England the speaker, Heaney tries to adopt an objective view, to "report fairly". But a fair report must represent the point of view of the woman. Heaney's own compassion bursts through the hard-nosed indifference of his persona, to express his sympathy with what MacDonagh calls the "dreadful constancy of being vulnerable" (p.135). The marks on Ireland's body are not just battle-lines but marks of pain which the poet traces in an attempt to make sense of the experience of having them inflicted rather than of inflicting them, and in an attempt to "salve" or soothe them through his poetry. The speaker declares "I am still imperially/Male", the heavy emphases on the last three words suggesting an implacable force. But it is not in the nature of an "imperially/Male" person to define himself in this way. (In Aubrey's story, did Ralegh reconsider the episode from the point of view of the victim, or even realize she was a victim? Certainly Aubrey himself is untroubled by "doubt" about how to judge or evaluate the episode: "I doubt not but this Hero took care of them both, and also that the Product was more than an ordinary mortal.") Heaney is not completely detached from the "tall kingdom", and cannot present him as such a brute after all.

Nevertheless, the poem remains the words of a man talking about his country as a raped woman—imagining that the victim is someone else, not himself. It is this that gives him his distance, allows him to entertain more than one "side". Elsewhere, he sympathizes with the trials of the "Bog Queen" (pp.32-5) and the "punishment" of the "Little adulteress" (p.38), and takes pleasure in his imaginative unpinning of "the dark-bowered queen" (p.31). The terrain is always female, and while he extends himself to understand and appreciate her, he always retains a sense of detachment. He never explores Ireland's sorrowful state by imagining *himself* raped, for example—he might find himself less torn in different directions if he did.

## IV

However difficult it is to give all the elements of history their due, our humanity compels us to try to do that. But it also compels us to make choices. These are issues raised again in "Punishment", where the choices are more immediate and more pressing than questions about how we interpret history. "Punishment" explores the difficulty of how to choose in a situation where ethical dichotomies seem irrelevant, where the either/or choice between two separate value-systems is inadequate to experience. The subject is a young Iron-age girl who was killed as punishment for adultery,[27] but again we find Heaney "compounding history" in his attempt to reflect further on those questions which have beset him from his beginnings as a poet: how can he reconcile the conflicts

[27]Like "The Tollund Man", this poem was inspired by a picture and description in Glob's book, *The Bog People*, of a drowned fourteen-year-old girl whose body was preserved in a Jutland bog.

between his personal responses to life with his solidarity with his community?

In the transforming but unchanging bog, the body of the young victim lies for centuries. Anonymous, powerless, silent, she gets no mention in accounts of history, however "fair" they purport to be, until, excavated and exposed, she enters Glob's book, to be "understood" in the archaeologists' sense of the word—analysed and explained, and to dumbfound the poet, who realizes when he sees her that other victims, whose punishment he has observed and condoned, were her "sisters". The opening lines of "Punishment" evoke her stumbling ("halt[ing]") reluctance as she is led, exposed and degraded to her death:

> I can feel the tug
> of the halter at the nape
> of her neck, the wind
> on her naked front.

Heaney "can feel the tug" as if on his own neck, now, and at the same time imagine the girl's vital young "sapling" body being "barked" and her metamorphosis, over the centuries, into "oak-bone, brain-firkin". She is presented as if she were almost a fossil, an "amber" object, but at the same time as "almost" a love-object: a "scapegoat" and a "Little adulteress", whose blindfold is a "bandage"and noose "a ring/to store/the memories of love". The observer's response to her is a mixture of sympathy and detachment, fascination, pity, and judgment.

Like her "sisters" in the North of Ireland, this girl was not punished to appease the gods, but to appease her tribe. In Heaney's interpretation (following Glob who followed Tacitus), she had offended not divine law but a social code. The crime she committed was to cross a humanly-erected barrier, to exercise her individual choice to inhabit an ambiguous position "in between" irreconcilably opposed systems of values. This

explains why the poet feels so intimate with her, why he "almost love[s]" her. But Heaney's response to her is entangled, for his reference (in "cast . . . the stones") to the New Testament story of the woman taken in adultery brings in the concept of sin, and the difficulty of judging. Heaney, like Christ in the story, keeps his head down, writing his way to a decision (John viii.3-11). Neil Corcoran points out that there are other, "more subdued biblical references" in the poem: to Leviticus, in the "scapegoat" and to one of the Psalms in the phrase "numbered bones" (p.117).

> I almost love you
> but would have cast, I know
> the stones of silence . . .
> . . .
> I who have stood dumb
> when your betraying sisters,
> cauled in tar,
> wept by the railings . . .

If the Ulster victims, "cauled in tar" are this girl's "sisters", their tribes, too, are "tarred with the same brush" as her Iron-age punishers. Sisterhood carries implications of union, and the girls' public display by the "railings" reminds us of the solidarity of another kind of sisterhood, the suffragettes. If the word "betraying" applies to the Iron-age girl and to the twentieth-century girls, it also seems to apply to Heaney himself: all these "sisters" are "betraying" him, leaving him exposed and vulnerable as he confesses he has left them, and as he renders them in the poem.

The poet who "stood dumb" also "stands" in another relation to the victims: he "understands"—with all the mingled connotations that word has, of familiarity and collusion with feelings he knows so well he can almost take them for granted:

> who would connive
> in civilized outrage
> yet understand the exact
> and tribal, intimate revenge.

Probably no other lines of Heaney's work have been the focus of so much attention as these final stanzas of "Punishment". Critical response has ranged from uneasy "understanding" to scandalized "outrage". On the one hand, for example, James Lafferty describes the poem as "a painful exercise in vacillation".[28] On the other, Stan Smith accuses the poet of "stumbling from a disinterested pose of 'artful voyeur' into a peatbog of prurient complicity . . . to rationalize refractory history into a myth".[29] And in George Watson's view, Heaney is "irrational" and "atavistic" rather than thoughtful or troubled: "The notorious ending of 'Punishment' explicitly rejects 'civilized outrage' as merely a superficial response to republican punishment; the truth of the feeling is the deep 'tribal' approval of vengeance, irrational, atavistic" (p.213). To approach the apparently irreconcilable opposites with such an either/or attitude is to read the poetry as presenting a clash between conflicting loyalties (to deplore and to sanction)—a clash implying that there must be a winner and a loser. But the most severe criticism comes from those who interpret Heaney's presentation of insoluble conflict as programmatic, lacking the very intensity it claims to feel. In his book about Ulster poetry, *Northern Voices,* Terence Brown finds the poetry in *North* "at times a remarkably skilled, compelling poetic organization of his indecision, lacking emotional range and drama";[30] and James Liddy speaks of Heaney's "planned rhetoric".[31]

The poem's strength does not lie in its "organization of his indecision" but in the language (more than "rhetoric"), which is Heaney's way into

---

[28]"Gifts from the Goddess: Heaney's 'Bog People'," *Eire-Ireland,* 17, No. 3 (1982), 132.
[29]"Escaped from the Massacre," *P.N. Review* , 4, No. 2 (1977), 61.
[30]*Northern Voices: Poets from Ulster* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1975), p.183.
[31]"Ulster Poets and the Catholic Muse," *Eire-Ireland,* 13, No. 4 (1978), p.136.

his experience, and our way into the poem. "Punishment" speaks for the Iron Age girl who, under the "weighing stone", did not make a sound. It also speaks for Heaney, who is now "weighed" down by the memory of his own silence when the "railing" girls of his own tribe "called" out for understanding. The movement of the poet's mind as he tries to recreate what happened and make a moral judgment is conveyed in the verbs, whose tenses shift from the simple present "I . . . love", through "[I] would have cast", "I am", "I . . . have stood", and "[I] would connive", and finally come to rest on the unambiguous present again: "[I] understand". What is clear to him now, face to face with the disinterred body, is the nature of his own action (or inaction). But he did not foresee, when he "stood dumb", that he would look back upon that experience from a perspective changed by the Jutland discovery. And just as he was not an objective self then, capable of distancing himself from his particular responses to a particular set of circumstances (including a sense of belonging to his own "tribe"), so he cannot detach himself now from this new experience. He can only participate in it; by opening himself up to it, try to "understand" what this experience suggests about the difficult question of how to live properly.

In other words "Punishment" is more than a presentation of the poet's indecision or a rationalization of his "atavism". It traces the movement of his mind as he explores these questions. As in "Act of Union", he wants to tell the whole story, to include and embrace apparently conflicting elements of his experience. To "report . . . fairly" requires a frame more flexible and open than mere polarities, but there is also a need for a firmness in one's own beliefs. In defining himself as "the artful voyeur . . ." Heaney admits that he is using the experience of the girls to

explore his own experience of intertwined outrage and understanding. Yet his self-castigation for his manipulation and inaction does not cancel out the compassion he expresses. The poem sustains a range of emotions and reflections, defying the polarizing tendency that urges an automatic judgment, a submission to imposed categories of right and wrong. Applying concepts of "right" and "wrong" to this "story" does not take it very far: if the girls are in the wrong, their punishers are also in the wrong, but the observer too is in the wrong, so all the values are open to question. How does that kind of exploration help define what is right? Heaney does not simply condemn himself in this poem; he also expresses compassion and tolerance—virtues not flaunted in times of extremity, when compassion may appear dangerously close to weakness and tolerance seems to shade into compliance. "Punishment" enshrines them as enduring and necessary values which extend beyond systems of classification.

The hunch that set Heaney on the track of these poems—his sensing of an "archetypal pattern"—bears fruit in "Punishment". One of the most striking features of Viking culture is that the concept of revenge was so deeply embedded, such an "intimate" part of it, that acts of revenge were understood to be beyond judgment. And the notion that any human action is beyond judgment is further interrogated by the "outstaring" face in "Strange Fruit", a poem in which the object of Heaney's scrutinizing gaze seems to scrutinize him in return, and twist his ideas back on themselves. That object is the excavated head of another Iron-age girl, a strange fruit, "like an exhumed gourd . . . prune-skinned, prune-stones for teeth". The title also refers to Lewis Allen's powerful anti-lynching poem "Strange Fruit", made famous by Billie Holiday's 1939 recording. But

Heaney's poem is no detached, Tacitus-like "civilized tut-tut" at the evidence of man's inhumanity to man. In a different way from the direct confession of "Punishment", Heaney accuses himself in this poem, reminding himself and his readers that even a poem which sees and holds contradictory points of view is not beyond judgment.

"Strange Fruit" is a compact poem which nevertheless pulls in different directions. Formally, the two parts of the sonnet resist each other, as the celebration of the girl's "strange" and "leathery beauty" in the octet is challenged and "outstar[ed]" by the later uncompromising description, which recalls that while the skull may now be a "Pash of tallow, perishable treasure", it once "was a woman . . . but, rest her soul, she's dead" (*Hamlet*, V, i, ll.139-40). And, like the hanged "Little adulteress", like Gunnar, she is "dead by violence". The word "pash" means both head and debris, but also a blow, and the reference to "Her broken nose" strengthens the suggestion of violence. With her "eyeholes blank as pools in the old workings" she is a terrible beauty indeed. Within single images, too, there are contradictory impulses: "prune-skinned", for example, suggests a sweetness in her wrinkled blackness. Even as the poem puts this "Strange Fruit" on display, Heaney feels the urge to dissociate himself from the archaeologists who make the head into a museum piece:

> They unswaddled the wet fern of her hair
> And made an exhibition of its coil,
> Let the air at her leathery beauty.

It is as if part of him wants her to be allowed to rest in peace, while another part wants her to be seen: the line "Let the air at her leathery beauty" may be read as an accusation of what "they" have done, or it may be taken as Heaney's imperative, telling them to stand back. But again, if

the air is "let at" this "treasure" it will "perish", and in some ways Heaney wants this to happen, too.

Although the words send out signals in different directions, the poetry is not "vacillating" or "indecisive". In the alliterative and attenuated lines describing how

> Diodorus Siculus confessed
> His gradual ease among the likes of this . . .

Heaney implicates himself with the ancient historian, acknowledging how he, too, has "gradual[ly]" become accustomed to such sights, so that he can confront with "ease" the head of a murdered girl, or describe the body of the Grauballe man with his "slashed throat", as if the "wound" in each of us which permits "the likes of this" to happen were "cured". If Heaney's "reverence" disposes him to tilt "beauty" in the balance against "atrocity", the defiant, "outstaring", hacked skull calls his mind back to human rather than aesthetic values. Can "beauty" be separated from life? Does it not have a moral dimension? As Stephen Dedalus puts it in *A Portrait of the Artist*, "The object of art is the creation of the beautiful. What is beautiful is another question." (p.185).

In the end the poem rejects both the "beatification" and, by close association, the "beautification" of the "Murdered" girl in the name of art. Nevertheless it offers itself as a work of art, a beautiful poem which embraces different ways of seeing—which recognizes that circling around such difficult issues is a sustaining as well as consuming process. It is Heaney's openness to other possible ways of seeing that keeps him going.

## V

My argument so far has suggested that in the process of Heaney's enthusiastic pursuit of a mythic parallel in *North*, he finds himself in a

forest of doubts and challenges, a place where it proves impossible for him to steer himself in a straight line. His explorations continually bring him back to the splits and divisions between his attempts to be true to immediate, local realities and to reach a larger understanding of them. The poetry shows him pulled in different directions, partly in ways he can understand but partly in ways that are beyond him right now because he is only discovering them as he writes. An essay Heaney published in 1978 (after *North* but before the publication of his next volume, *Field Work*) is worth attending to for the light it sheds on his own poetry around this time. "The Makings of a Music" (*Preoccupations*, pp.61-78) contrasts the lives and works of Wordsworth and Yeats, "seeking the origins of a poet's characteristic 'music' ". This essay is referred to by all the major critics of Heaney, and his observations, especially about Wordsworth, are often applied to his own method of composition. But while the essay is read, it is seldom read critically.

In summary, Heaney examines the distinctive "music" of Wordsworth and Yeats, and finds that Wordworth's music is "hypnotic, swimming with the current of its form rather than against it" (p.61), his way of creating poetry being to "grope along the grains of the language" (p.68). He contrasts this with Yeats's music, which he describes as "affirmative, seeking to master rather than to mesmerize the ear, swimming strongly against the current of its form" (p.62). He goes on to argue that Yeats, "instead of surrendering to the drift of the original generating rhythm . . . seeks to discipline it, to harness its energies in order to drive other parts of his mind into motion" (pp.61-2). And while he considers that Wordsworth's "great strength and originality as a writer came first of all from his trusting the validity of experience" (p.69), he finds that in Yeats's

poetry "thoughts do not ooze out and into one another, they are hammered into unity" (p.75).

At this stage of his development, Heaney identifies with Wordsworth's "essential capacity . . . to listen" (p.69). He aligns his own music-making with Wordsworth's when he suggests that nature herself is responsible for poetic "composition": in describing the degree to which Wordsworth is attuned to the river Derwent, for example, he says, "The river flows into dreams and composes" (p.70). This is not far from the idea expressed in "Kinship":

> This is the vowel of earth
> dreaming its root
> in flowers and snow...
>
> I grew out of all this
> like a weeping willow
> inclined to
> the appetites of gravity.

And in the older poet's pacing up and down the gravel path Heaney finds an echo of the way he circles his own terrain, covering and recovering a limited patch of ground as he "listens" to his own experience of Irish farm life:

> The poet as ploughman, if you like, and the suggestive etymology of the word 'verse' itself is pertinent in this context. 'Verse' comes from the Latin *versus* which could mean a line of poetry but could also mean the turn that a ploughman made at the head of the field as he finished one furrow and faced back into another. Wordsworth on the gravel path, to-ing and fro-ing like a ploughman up and down a field, his voice rising and falling between the measure of his pentameters, unites the old walking meaning of *versus* with the newer, talking sense of verse. (p.65)

If Heaney wants to write an essay in praise of Wordsworth's "wise passiveness", to argue that his "surrender" is "definitive of his music" (p.71), why bring Yeats into the argument at all? Partly he does so because, in order to argue that "surrender" comes before definition, he needs a poet to contrast with the master of surrender, Wordsworth, and chooses

Yeats, as a master of shape. But partly he does so because, while he can lean into Wordsworth's way of composing, he wants to comprehend Yeatsian control. The word he chooses to evaluate Wordsworth's surrender, "definitive", is telling. He realizes that "surrender" alone does not make a poem, and that even the most responsive poet shapes the experience to which he responds. He has found corroboration of his sense of Wordsworthian surrender in the poet's own prose, in Dorothy Wordsworth's journals, and in the recollections of people who knew him; so that he feels that he knows him, too. But the mastery and mystery of Yeats's creative processes elude Heaney, and he yearns to understand the element of composition that is not a "yielding", but "the music of energy reined down, of the mastered beast stirring" (p.73).

Yet while the essay suggests Heaney's sense of affinity with Wordsworth, it also sets up a contrast between them. Heaney's estimation of Wordsworth presents a man who, unlike himself, seems content to bury his head in the sands of nature, untroubled by any need to define his stance, or to prevent himself from "sinking into" the scenery. The river Derwent, not the lives of men, is "tutor of his poetic ear. The tongue of the river, he implies, licks him into poetic shape" (p.69). The extract from Dorothy's journal which catches Heaney's attention tells how Wordsworth is happy to listen to "the *peaceful* sounds of the earth", content "just to know that our dear friends were near"(p.68), but not to listen to them. And the commentary Heaney selects from Canon Rawnsley's informants, which is intended to describe Wordsworth's habit of composing aloud, also serves to suggest how he shut himself off from human nature, from the very people whose efforts made it possible for him to compose his verses:

> Mrs Wudsworth would say, 'Ring the bell,' but he wouldn't stir, bless ye. 'Goa and see what he's doing,' she'd say, and we wad goa up to study door and hear him a mumbling and bumming through hit. 'Dinner's ready, sir,' I'd ca' out, but he'd goa mumbling on like a deaf man, ya see. And sometimes Mrs. Wordsworth 'ud say, 'Goa and brek a bottle, or let a dish fall just outside door in passage.' Eh dear, that maistly wad bring him out, wad that. (p.64)

While Heaney can appreciate the trials of poor Mrs Wordsworth, he appreciates even more the poet's need for solitude, for "this mesmerized attention to the echoes and invitations within"(p.63). He cannot share the totality of Wordsworth's absorption in his poetry, however, for (like "The Diviner" who goes "Circling the terrain/hunting the pluck/Of water"), Heaney is unable to detach his gift from the human community it serves.

By contrast with Wordsworth, secluded in Dove Cottage, Yeats remained intrepidly in touch with his world, and with its political situation; and this is another reason why Yeats is brought into the discussion. Heaney's admiration for Yeats's mastery comes through almost despite himself: the comparison with Wordsworth is set up to be unfavourable. Beginning with the reference by Yeats's father to his son's "manipulation" and "bad metres" (p.71), Heaney goes on to contrast Yeat's "self-conscious . . . posture" with "the unselfconscious Wordsworth". Here is a short passage in which Heaney inclines to damn Yeats, even using another man's faint praise to do it. After quoting from "The Tower", a "major" poem, he comments:

> This is theatrical in its triumph, and many of the high moments in the *Collected Poems* share its rhetorical cast. At its worst that rhetoric is bragging; at its level best it has, to use Denis Donoghue's finely tuned adjective, an equestrian authority. (p.73)

Why is Heaney reluctant ("at its level best") to admire Yeats's mastery? Because he fears the influence of life beyond the Wordsworthian "trances of thought and mountings of the mind" to control and "complete" poetry. Throughout his discussion of Yeats's poetry, Heaney relates the poet's

process of composition with the finished quality of his work: "All depends on the completeness of the holding down" (p.72); "We are aware of the finished poem as an impressive thing in itself but somehow more impressive because of a threshold of difficulties now overcome" (p.74); "the unwavering ceremonious procedures of his verse depend upon the way he wrought strongly for finish in the act of composition itself" (p.76). Heaney shies away from this conception of the poem as finished, polished off: he really believes in staying open. And because he is receptive and open, by listening and talking to poets in America he realized that "poetry was a force, almost a mode of power, certainly a mode of resistance", as he told James Randall.[32] Back in divided Ireland and confronted with physical and spiritual violence, he suspects that Yeats was right about "The Choice":

> The intellect of man is forced to choose
> Perfection of the life, or of the work,
> And if it take the second must refuse
> A heavenly mansion, raging in the dark.
> (*Collected Poems*, p.278)

In *North* we can see how Heaney had become what he feared—both involved in the political and social realities surrounding him, and unwilling to take responsibility for that involvement. Yeats made a choice, stood up and was counted, and Heaney accuses himself of Hamletizing, of "dithering" instead of making a choice, and "blathering" instead of speaking out. But at the same time he sees that Yeats's Ireland was different from the one he knows, where any act of participation only adds another weight—another brick, another death—to one or other side of the scales.

---

[32]James Randall, "An Interview with Seamus Heaney," *Ploughshares*, 5, No.3 (1979), 20.

He nevertheless divides the book into two "different types of utterance". The poems in the second part attempt to answer more explicitly the same questions pursued in the main first part of the volume: what is the proper way for Heaney the man, the poet, to respond to the poisonous violence which seems to "infuse" his country? These poems, too, are studded with others' advice. Here is the counsel of Michael McLaverty, for example:

> . . .. 'Listen. Go your own way.
> Do your own work. Remember
> Katherine Mansfield—*I will tell*
> *How the laundry basket squeaked* . . . that note of exile.'
> (p.71)

This wisdom recognizes that the poet is an individual, experiencing life from his own particular perspective(s); but Heaney's confidence in it falters: he records the precise location and time of this advice ("Royal/Avenue, Belfast, 1962,/A Saturday afternoon") as if to question its current relevance even as he acknowledges his debt for McLaverty's "Fosterage". More up-to-date advice commends the poet to adopt a public role:

> 'Go back,' one said, 'try to touch the people.'
> Another conjured Lorca from his hill.
> ("Summer 1969")

Part II of *North* shows Heaney attempting to do that: attempting to hammer out poems that confront the serious problems of living in a society in which "whatever you say, you say nothing"(p.59). I have argued that Heaney inclines to a Wordsworthian responsiveness and surrender; and part of the reality to which he surrenders is the expectation of others. Their advice chimes with his own inner sense of responsibility to stand up and be counted, requiring him to be the kind of person who acts in such a way. McLaverty's recommendation to "go your own way" is sound,

but Heaney finds it difficult to know his own way when he is in the process of making it.

The conflict he sets up in the essay on Wordsworth and Yeats reflects his own internal conflict. "Affirmation arises out of oppositions", he remarks of Yeats's best work (p.77), and the final poem in *North*, "Exposure", shows that this is also true in his own case. Heaney explores how his public "exposure" has helped shape him, and to some extent suggests how the pressure of expectations can make it very difficult for a "responsible" public person to know his identity, and can even bring him to doubt whether he has an identity at all. He describes himself as "An inner émigré", strange even to himself, and asks "How did I end up like this"—as if he has "ended" up somewhere, yet feeling that his explorations have taken him nowhere. He can find no "absolute" answers to his questions about what the life of his society, and what his life as a poet in this society, is worth.

He presents himself in the countryside, "Escaped from the massacre" (like Wordsworth), listening to "low conducive voices" of the rain; he wants to divine, through nature, how to conduct himself through this bleak landscape. The rain's "Mutter[ing]" seems to recall the poet's "let-downs", his disappointments, particularly at being misunderstood. Once he "loved the dark drop" ("Personal Helicon"), and in "Kinship", too, he claims

> I love the spring
> off the ground,
> each bank a gallows drop . . .

Now each drop of rain "recalls" him, summoning him back from the belief that it is possible to "Keep your eye clear/as the bleb of the icicle". *North* charts his rediscovery that any position is relative, and that

"diamond absolutes" are possible only for those whose "stance" is "unilateral", those whose view of the world is unclouded by the awareness that they, too, are "infused/with its poisons". And yet Heaney wants the rain to "mutter" his absolution, to free from guilt, and also from obligation.

> I am neither internee nor informer;
> An inner émigré, grown long-haired
> And thoughtful; a wood-kerne
>
> Escaped from the massacre,
> Taking protective colouring
> From bole and bark, feeling
> Every wind that blows;
>
> Who, blowing up these sparks
> For their meagre heat, have missed
> The once-in-a-lifetime portent,
> The comet's pulsing rose.

Heaney has been praised for the way he captures and "expos[es]" his doubts and anxieties here, his suspicion that he "let down" himself as well as others when he "Escaped from the massacre" of the North and went to the woods, like Thoreau, because he wanted to live deliberately. And "Exposure" does seem to me to be genuinely "weighing and weighing" these issues, sounding a note of survival as well as regret. But it is worth pausing to consider why he describes himself as a "wood-kerne". The word means "foot soldier" but the poem is often read as if it were the Irish for "greeny", a recluse who, having escaped from human contact to the natural habitat of the woods, has "grown long-haired/and thoughtful". So much for the first part of the word; what of "kerne", meaning "soldier"? The long social and literary history of "wood-kernes" makes it clear that they were not simply men of the trees, they were bandits. The historian A.T.Q. Stewart explains:

> The text and woodcuts in John Derricke's *Image of Ireland*, published in 1591, depict activities startlingly similar to those which are still occurring in the twentieth century. Under a picture of a kerne setting fire to a farmhouse, Derricke's verses tell us that these are 'a pack of prowling mates' who 'spare no more their country byrth, than those of th' English race'.
>
> > *They spoile, and burne, and beare away, as fitte occasion serue,*
> > *And thinke the greater ill they doe, the greater prayse deserve;*
> > *They pass not for the poore mans cry, nor yet respect his teares*
> > *But rather joy to see the fire, to flash about his eares.*
> > *To see both flame, and smouldering smoke, to dusk the christall skyes.*
> > *Next to their pray, therein I say, their second glory lyes.*
>
> . . . To a remarkable degree, the I.R.A. and other terrorist groups still follow this practice [of threatening potential victims], and indeed the whole barbarous process of intimidation in Belfast and elsewhere since 1969 can only be understood in relation to long folk-memories of how such things are done.[33]

So what is Heaney "expos[ing]" when he describes himself as a wood-kerne? Is he claiming that he is a secret warrior-poet, so well camouflaged that he cannot be seen, even in a poem called "Exposure"? To my mind, the image suggests that he is still doubtful about the "artful voyeur" aspect of poetry-writing. He feels that, like a wood-kerne, he participates in and makes raids on the world of inequities and violence he deplores. But at the same time, as a writer rather than a fighter, he retreats from the world, migrates into himself. The writer is "responsible" for making the soldier brave, turning the wood-kerne into a glorious freedom-fighter, the outcast into a hero, and the émigré into a romantic figure. "I am the poet, exposed", he seems to say—and to be a "responsible" poet he needs to maintain and sustain in himself the capacity to "surrender", to imaginatively enter into different ways of being, different ways of seeing the world.

---

[33]A.T.Q. Stewart, *The Narrow Ground: The Roots of Conflict in Ulster* (London: Faber and Faber, 1977, rev. edn 1989), pp.115-17.

If Heaney expresses what he might describe as a Wordsworthian "passiveness" in this poem, he also expresses an affinity with Yeats. He keeps his imagination and intelligence in motion, searching for something "finished" and "complete": he yearns for the "comet's pulsing rose", to "come on meteorite", as if a moment of clarity would illuminate everything he pursues in his poetry. But his poetry illuminates itself, not in one moment, or in a single brilliant image, but in an accumulation of images within poems and between different poems and volumes. We recall the memorable lines in "Personal Helicon": "I rhyme/To see myself,/to set the darkness echoing"—not to discover or expose the truth in a bright flash. Since poetry is conditioned by the life that surrounds the poet, in Heaney's case it is sure to be full of ambiguities and contradictions.

"Exposure" ends the volume on a note of speculation (as Keats says all deep enterprises do). The speaker figures himself "taking protective colouring" from the trees, but no shelter: "feeling/Every wind that blows". His own "frail rigging" is "shaken" by the fact that he can be blown in many directions: he "can feel" the wind that blows on the naked front of the girl in "Punishment", yet "sniff" the sea wind with the Vikings. His body, like the Bog Queen's (and like Wordsworth's) is "braille/for the creeping influences" (p.32). Those influences include that of Yeats: like him, Heaney can feel "the wind's vowel/blowing through the hazels" (p.48). Indeed, the very phrase "every wind that blows" comes from "My House", one of Yeats's own "Meditations in Time of Civil War" (*Collected Poems*, p. 226).

And like Yeats, Heaney wants to bring the state of the world closer to his intuition of how it could be. He accuses himself of inaction, of

reaching a state of sterile, "useless equilibrium" (*Field Work*, p.60), as he "sit[s] weighing and weighing/[his] responsible *tristia*". But action for a poet is writing—an action which requires a receptiveness, a "surrender" which is of its nature passive. He is even acting when he shuns the more "artful" aspect of writing, the shaping, forging element, because of the "exposure" it entails to risks of falsification and distortion. He has tried, by counterposing "symbolic" and "explicit" poems, to achieve a balance in the volume, but finds the balance no more "adequate to [their] condition" than the clichés people utter in the streets: " 'One side's as bad as the other,' never worse" (p.59). There is a suggestion that the "archetypal pattern" behind the poems in *North* was not "the once-in-a-lifetime portent", that it was an aporia—a pathless path, leading nowhere. The answer to that is the poems themselves. It germinated them and eventually dislodged that pattern from the centre of the poet's mind.

The "makings" of Heaney's own music in *North* is division. Yet the two dedicatory poems point towards the "act of union" the volume is searching for. Heaney goes back to his childhood in "Mossbawn", to retrieve the values he treasures (without treasure being mentioned). "Sunlight" and "The Seed Cutters" are concerned with memory, not as a "cud" of old grievances to be chewed over, but as a way of keeping alive the simple "customary rhythms" of rural life. These poems "set" the cold, "dark" side of *North* "echoing".

In "Sunlight", dedicated to the woman whose life is dedicated to the family, the poet is not worried about being "responsible"; he is simply responding. The woman is pictured in the kitchen where she spent "each long afternoon" baking. This is her centre, and as she glows in the heat of the stove, with everything reflected off her, there seems to be no way of

separating what she is from what she does. The kitchen is her "Forge", the reddening stove like the blacksmith's furnace, but the difference is that Heaney belongs behind this door: this is where he comes from.

Mary Heaney is imagined not in the darkness but bathed in light, seen in and as the centre of the home. Whereas the centre of "The Forge" was guessed at ("The anvil must be somewhere in the centre"), and the blacksmith's "fantail of sparks/Or hiss when a new shoe toughens in water" were "unpredictable", in this poem the kitchen is recreated with knowledge and love. The music here, far from the "short pitched ring" of the "hammered anvil", is the sound of her hands as they "scuffle" softly (like mice), and the undisturbed "tick of two clocks". These are like the clocks of two lifetimes, the tick of two hearts, and although they are not synchronized the "space" between them is so small it cannot be measured.

The woman's work has its own magic, caught in the detail of her dusting the bakeboard "with a goose's wing". The boy Heaney has been part of that magic, so close to her that he has seen how the heat affected her, "reddening" her face and "measling" her "shins". Her ample, "broad-lapped" figure seems almost designed for climbing on, and it is surely from that position that he has inspected her "whitened nails". When she moves away from the "plaque of heat" to stand by "the window" in a "floury apron", she is far from the caricature of the blacksmith who, "leather-aproned, hairs in his nose", leaned out of the doorway of his forge. But compared to the earlier poem's attempt to estimate the value of the man who "beat real iron out", this poem gives Mary Heaney her "real" value. The pump in the yard is like a "helmeted" soldier at her service, warming the water and making it sweet for her, like a love-token, and even the sun stands still to pour its warmth down on her:

There was a sunlit absence.
The helmeted pump in the yard
heated its iron,
water honeyed

in the slung bucket
and the sun stood
like a griddle cooling
against the wall

of each long afternoon.

She is a presence, an essential element of the poet's childhood, the love felt between them apparently ordinary (tin, as opposed to "real iron") and, like the internal rhyme between "tin" and "bin", so deeply buried in the everyday that it is hardly visible, yet irradiates and warms everything within its orb.

And here is love
like a tinsmith's scoop
sunk past its gleam
in the meal-bin.

Outside, "The Seed Cutters" live their lives in intimate contact with the rhythms of the land and its processes. They dig the ground, they plant, they take out and put back in—their "calendar customs" establishing an unforced continuity between past and present which is mirrored in the cyclic syntax of the second line here:

They kneel under the hedge in a half-circle
Behind a windbreak wind is breaking through.

They too know about exposure, about "feeling/Every wind that blows"; and they experience both "beauty and atrocity", as the "dark watermark" at the heart of the potatoes' "milky gleam" reminds us. Yet the total image is serene, as if there were a hidden order in their life, like the internal rhymes in the poem. The long vowels—the "ahs" and "ayes"—sound like wisps of country folks' talk carried on the wind:

. . . Each sharp knife goes
Lazily halving each root that falls apart

In the palm of the hand . . .

"Taking their time" as the world turns, "compos[ing] the frieze" that includes the poet and "all of us there", the seed-cutters unobtrusively enact a cyclic pattern. And the pattern of the poem itself is equally unobtrusive: a Shakespearian sonnet, it quietly asserts the line of Heaney's literary culture as well as his social one.

By the end of *North*, Heaney has looped back to the sense of belonging in these introductory poems, and to the discovery expressed in the first poem in the volume "Antaeus" (deliberately dated: 1966).

> . . . I cannot be weaned
> Off the earth's long contour, her river-veins.
> Down here in my cave
>
> Girdered with root and rock
> I am cradled in the dark that wombed me
> And nurtured in every artery
> like a small hillock.

*Field Work*, his next volume, sees him turning again to the female centre, and to the rhythms of the earth, in an attempt to reconnect with this source of "nurture" but at the same time to grow beyond its "cradl[ing]" dark.

Nor for my peace should I go far
As wanderers do, that still do roam,
But make my strengths, such as they are,
Here in my bosom, and at home.

Ben Jonson
"A Farewell to the World"

## *CHAPTER FOUR*

### Crossing the Field:
### *Field Work* (1979)

I

*Field Work* presents Heaney's attempt to get back in touch with the earth itself through poetry, and to retrieve something he feels he has lost. Yet much of this retrieval, this renewed contact with nature, comes from sources different from those in his previous volumes. His early analogies of poet and artisan, his explorations into Ireland's history and his search for parallels and patterns in other cultures, all reappear in *Field Work*, but in different configurations. His status as a poet still marks him as an outsider, cut off not only from other people but from the very source of his poetic power. He feels that he has been "weaned/Off the earth's long contour" ("Antaeus"), and in these poems he tries to find his way back, in many poems orbiting around the woman to rediscover what his life means. More than simply "circling the terrain", in this volume he tries to break back into his own circle, and return to his beginnings. But as he pursues this, his dialogue with himself and others develops across the boundaries of poems, plaguing him with the idea that he is locked in a vicious circle: that as a poet who feeds off the ills of the world, he can never plough back to an earlier creative innocence.

At the heart of the volume, the "Glanmore Sonnets" sequence records the transformation of nature into sound, "Vowels ploughed into other", coming at a time when the poet himself feels "other", as if he has been cut off from the "fundamental" source of his nourishment. In these poems he imagines that like the land itself, he is "opened ground", "Vulnerable"

to the plough. The imagery recalls the poem "Act of Union", but here the idea is "turned round" from considering the destructive effects of such repeated wounding to an exploration of the other side of that experience.

> Now the good life could be to cross a field
> And art a paradigm of earth new from the lathe
> Of ploughs.

There is a belief that "the good life", and art, "could be" possible here, just as the earth, shaped into a new configuration by "the lathe/Of ploughs", can now bring forth new crops. Heaney has come to Glanmore, in the south of Ireland, so that he can once more be in a place where "the turned-up acres breathe". If in one sense the words "My lea is deeply tilled" suggest that he has exhausted the possibilities of his own home field and needs some respite from the north (both personally and culturally), in another these words imply that the "turn[ing]-up" is a good thing: in disturbing "the subsoil of each sense", it has prepared him to produce new growth.

The "Glanmore Sonnets" (indeed the greater part of the volume) show Heaney's language "quickened" by his breathing in of the "redolen[t]" natural world around him, until "Words enter[] almost the sense of touch". Neil Corcoran sums up the achievement of these poems as "a sensuously exact evocation of living eye-level close to the processes and seasons of the natural world, its animal life and its vegetation" (p.143). This could also be a description of Wordsworth's poetry, and in Heaney's attempts to establish contact with nature he is greatly influenced by his admiration for Wordsworth's "sinking in[to]" the countryside so that it could compose through his senses and be "the tutor of his poetic ear" (*Preoccupations*, p.68). The spirit of Wordsworth is present throughout the sonnet sequence; behind Heaney's distinctive voice we can detect the

earlier poet's voice. In the first "Glanmore Sonnet", for example, Heaney conveys the return of his divining powers in the following words:

> . . . Breasting the mist, in sowers' aprons,
> My ghosts come striding into their spring stations.

The imagery here recalls the "Spring water suddenly broadcasting . . . its secret stations" in Heaney's early poem, "The Diviner". But these words send back more than Heaney's "own call/With a clean new music in it" ("Personal Helicon"); they also echo Wordsworth's description in *The Prelude* of *his* sentiments when the "Imagination" he had "lost sight of" returned, like Heaney's "ghosts":

> . . . it rose once more
> In strength, reflecting from its placid breast
> The works of man and face of human life . . . [1]

Wordsworth's influence is acknowledged again in the opening of the second sonnet, where Heaney attributes to the earlier poet his rediscovered ability to "Sens[e] . . . the hiding places" where "small buds shoot and flourish in the hush" (Sonnet V). Indeed, throughout the sequence Heaney demonstrates his own way of "groping along the grains" of the language, and each sonnet enacts the movement Heaney describes as essential to Wordsworth's method of composition ("the poet as ploughman if you like"):

> Vowels ploughed into other, opened ground,
> Each verse returning like the plough turned round.

There are more than linguistic parallels between the two poets. Heaney seems to feel that his surrender to the "cadences" of the Glanmore landscape resembles Wordsworth's way of "feeling" his way back into the sights and sounds of nature when, "At a time/when Nature . . . had fallen back/Into a second place" in his affections, he returned to live with his

---

[1]William Wordsworth, *Poetical Works* ed. Ernest de Selincourt (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1969), pp.585-6 (Book Fourteenth, ll.199-202).

"Dear Sister" Dorothy, whose "breath . . . was a kind of gentler spring/That went before [his] steps." (Book Fourteenth, ll. 256-66) The third "Glanmore Sonnet" specifically draws that parallel:

> I had said earlier, 'I won't relapse
> From this strange loneliness I've brought us to.
> Dorothy and William—'

The woman in Glanmore "interrupts", but does not disturb the man's romantic musings, and he continues as if she had not spoken:

> Outside a rustling and twig-combing breeze
> Refreshes and relents. Is cadences.

It is as if, despite the interruptions that are also in him, he thinks of their intimacy as inspired by that which Dorothy and William Wordsworth enjoyed with each other and the nature that surrounded them. Here the "rustling and twig-combing breeze" recalls Dorothy's description (which Heaney quotes in his essay on Wordsworth and Yeats in *Preoccupations*, p.68), of a morning idyll when she and William lay

> listening to the waterfalls . . . [and] the voice of the air. William heard me breathing and rustling now and then but we both lay still and unseen by one another.

Unlike her brother, Dorothy never loses contact with her surroundings. It is she who restores to William the source of his inspiration: the poet tells us that his "beloved Sister"

> Maintained for me a saving intercourse
> With my true self; for, though bedimmed and changed
> Much, as it seemed, I was no further changed
> Than as a clouded and a waning moon:
> She whispered still that brightness would return,
> She, in the midst of all, preserved me still
> A Poet, made me seek beneath that name,
> And that alone, my office upon earth . . .
> (Book Eleventh, ll. 341-53)

"Glanmore Sonnets" IV and V suggest that Heaney wants to regain access to his youth, to experience young love again, and through it create new poetry.

> So, etymologist of roots and graftings,
> I fall back to my tree-house and would crouch
> Where small buds shoot and flourish in the hush.

The "unsayable" beauty that surrounds him, the quiet country life "lush with omen", tempts him into poetry, but he needs the woman he calls in Sonnet VIII:

> Come to me quick, I am upstairs shaking.
> My all of you birchwood in lightning.

This woman has her feet firmly on the ground. Sonnet IX pictures the poet upstairs—"nursing the bright names" he has heard on the weather forecast, or wondering how to interpret the "lush . . . omen" of the raindrops ("How deep into the woodpile sat the toad?")—while she is in the kitchen, being stared at by a rat. She breaks into the poet's reveries (did she drop a dish outside his door?), insisting that "I'm not/Imagining things" and that he should do something about it. But Heaney dramatizes himself as being more absorbed in being a poet than in interacting directly with vermin around the house. He transforms the Wicklow farmland first into a "wilderness", then into a pastoral scene, as a laurel becomes a "burnished bay tree"; and finds the penetrating "reek of silage" to be as "tart . . . as inwit". The reference to Stephen's medieval word in *Ulysses* suggests that pangs of conscience are not the speaker's immediate concern. The question he is pondering is more literary than moral: "What is my apology for poetry?" When he "come[s] down" to earth, the real rat has disappeared and, looking through the kitchen window he can "glimpse" only a sign of what was once present but is now gone:

> The empty briar is swishing
> When I come down, and beyond, your face
> Haunts like a new moon glimpsed through tangled glass.

For Heaney, as for Wordsworth, what it means to be a poet is a question of the first order, and it is through the woman that he glimpses the

possibilities of a new poetry. The "Field Work" sequence of poems, which gives the volume its title, exhibits a curious correspondence between Wordsworth's dependence on Dorothy for the "return" of his creative response to the natural world, and Heaney's own belief that through his wife he might be able to "cross" to her side of the "field". The serenity of domestic rituals, celebrated in "Sunlight", is pushed further in "Field Work", as the poet tries to divine the source of the woman's harmony with the natural world, a harmony sensed in "The Wife's Tale".

Part I of "Field Work" has the man "standing watching" the woman in a still landscape, his poet's eye like "the perfect eye of the nesting blackbird", alert to the slightest movement, transmitting every observation to the mind. But the poet's human (imperfect) eye sees things differently from the feathered songster. He sees the woman's absorption in her domestic doings as close to the nesting blackbird's perfection. Between the bird and the egg, the woman and her family, there is the mystery of creation. Here in the fresh countryside the poet is trying to make contact with that miracle: he is hatching a poem. In the first three lines, the long vowels and the repetition of "where"—like a gentle exhalation—suggest that even in this "perfect" setting, poetry does not come easily.

> Where the sally tree went pale in every breeze,
> where the perfect eye of the nesting blackbird watched,
> where one fern was always green
>
> I was standing watching you . . .

Here is an example of the kind of "surrender" Heaney admires in Wordsworth, and the slow sounds draw the reader into the situation of the poem. The speaker, "taking protective colouring" from the landscape, watches, biding his time and breathing in the woman's unselfconscious

communion with the natural world as she goes about her "mothering" work. By watching her like this he hopes to close the gap between them, but she is cut off from his view by the train that comes between them, leaving him stranded on the other side of the tracks.

Her vaccination mark is evidence that for her, as for him, this life in rural simplicity is a return. She too has been subject to foreign influences, but she retains her sense of being at home in the Irish countryside, taking up the wash as if she had never left. His imperfect eye can "see" the vaccination mark "stretched on [her] upper arm", suggesting her flexibility, because he is studying not just her, or the land, but his personal situation.

> But your vaccination mark is on your thigh,
> An O that's healed into the bark. . . .

The poem presents the speaker in the act of rethinking—remembering that in fact the woman's vaccination mark is hidden away, and realizing that she bears no obvious sign of their departures "across Atlantic and Pacific waters", which have marked him indelibly. She seems, rather like a dryad, to belong in this landscape. Like the "O" in "Broagh", her vaccination wound has "healed": she has absorbed change (just as she has taken the cow-vaccine into her bloodstream) without changing essentially.

Again it is all slightly reminiscent of Wordsworth's experience in *The Prelude*. A passage from Book XII (ll. 99-100, 127-31, 148-61) provides a good example of the parallel: Wordsworth describes how he "waited . . . now all eye and now/All ear" upon the "Soul of Nature":

> I speak in recollection of a time
> When the bodily eye, in every stage of life
> The most despotic of our senses, gained
> Such strength in *me* as often held my mind
> In absolute dominion.

He goes on to contrast his experience, "Amid the turns and counterturns" of life, with that of "a maid" who "escaped these bonds", a woman whose "eye was not the mistress of her heart":

> . . . wise as women are
> When genial circumstance hath favoured them,
> She welcomed what was given, and craved no more;
> Whate'er the scene presented to her view
> That was the best, to that she was attuned
> By her benign simplicity of life . . .

Heaney's quest for a bird's-eye view turns his mind to another field of literature in Section II of "Field Work". Gazing at the woman, as they both gazed at the moon "small and far", he finds that her secret remains inviolable. She has the attachment he aspires to, but he is lost somewhere between what he was, what he would like to be and what he has become. The direct allusions to the "coin" and the "*Pequod*'s mast" in *Moby Dick* intrude (in a way the indirect references to *The Prelude* do not), increasing the distance between him and the woman's intimacy with the land.

What is the image that best conveys the natural attachment he yearns for? The third section rejects the "mud slick" and the "black weedy water" of his early poems about wells and eels. The wintry landscape of "Exposure" and the "tart green shade" of the "Glanmore Sonnets" are summoned up, only to have their significance emphatically negated: "Not . . . Not . . . Not . . . ". Clearing away the familiar aspects of his poetic terrain, Heaney finds the single, "perfect" image;

> . . . in a still corner,
> braced to its pebble-dashed wall,
> heavy, earth-drawn, all mouth and eye,
>
> the sunflower, dreaming umber.

Heaney's sunflower, like Blake's, is an image of aspiration. The poet in his own "still corner", himself "heavy, earth-drawn, all mouth and eye", follows the "pad" of the woman who radiates a glow even in this lovely

green landscape. But just as Blake's "Sunflower" can also be interpreted as an emblem of aspiration trapped in a natural cycle, Heaney's sunflower, "dreaming umber" and yearning for release, has something of that hopeless "pining away" we recall from "Funeral Rites". Taken another way, "the sunflower, dreaming umber" is the literal flowering of the earth, the lovely natural creation which seems a perfect image of what the poet himself wishes to produce.

The dreaming umber is left behind with a shock at the beginning of Section IV: "Catspiss smell . . .". Back in the damp, fungal landscape a curious, druid-like ritual takes place, as the man superimposes on the woman's hand a mark which he wants to be more significant than the vaccination mark.

> I press a leaf
> of the flowering currant
> on the back of your hand
> for the tight slow burn
> of its sticky juice
> to prime your skin,
> and your veins to be crossed
> criss-cross with leaf-veins.
> I lick my thumb
> and dip it in mould,
> I anoint the anointed
> leaf-shape.

He re-anoints her with earth as if to transform her: earlier, she is thought of as almost a spirit of the woods:

> Except a dryad's not a woman
> you are my wounded dryad.

Now, as the "mould/blooms and pigments/the back of [her] hand" she is reborn in his imagination as an earth spirit, even a goddess:

> my umber one,
> you are stained, stained
> to perfection.

The point of this almost child-like ritual is not so much that he stains her but that he feels he is stained too, through her. Just as he imaginatively transformed the Tollund Man into a saint, attributing to him the power to bring forth life and hope from the "cauldron bog" of Ireland, so he blesses this woman's germinal power, believing that she is the means by which he can create new poems.

And sometimes this proves to be the case. When he turns to her as a woman rather than as a "perfect" spirit of nature, freeing himself of the need to "impress", he finds that the ability to create was within him all the time. In his waiting and watching he forgets "the growth of the poet's mind" and rediscovers not his "Imagination", but her. We see this in "The Otter", which begins with a holiday memory of the man watching the woman plunge and surface in the pool, seeming as much at home in the water as she is on land.

> I sat dry-throated on the warm stones.
> You were beyond me.
> The mellowed clarities, the grape-deep air
> Thinned and disappointed.

But the memory of her turnings in the water becomes an image of her winding and unwinding him, as lovers do, and the dreamy rhythms suggest a mind habituated ("the slow loadening") to the advances and retirings of love.

> When I hold you now
> We are close and deep
> As the atmosphere on water.
>
> My two hands are plumbed water.
> You are my palpable, lithe
> Otter of memory
> In the pool of the moment,
>
> Turning to swim on your back,
> Each silent, thigh-shaking kick
> Re-tilting the light,
> Heaving the cool at your neck.

In "Polder", too, he comes to the woman through nature, and comes to nature through her. This poem describes their reunion when, "After the sudden outbursts and squalls" of an argument, he holds her in a "caliper embrace" as if to capture the calibre of their love, and finds himself coming back to life.

> I have reclaimed my polder,
> all its salty grass and mud-slick banks;
>
> under fathoms of air, like an old willow,
> I stir a little on my creel of roots.

The poem "Homecomings" does not mention the woman as human at all; but it does not present her as a conduit through which he can re-establish contact with nature. She is for him the earth itself, the nest, the dwelling-place and destination of his restless spirit.

> At the worn mouth of the hole
> flight after flight after flight
> the swoop of his wings
> gloved and kissed home.

He sweeps back "home" to her for sustenance, shelter, protection—and also for inspiration:

> Mould my shoulders inward to you.
> Occlude me.
> Be damp clay pouting.
> Let me listen under your eaves.

"Trust the . . . nubbed treasure/your hands have known", advised the voice in "North". This woman is the nubbed treasure he has held in his "two hands". In describing her in terms of an otter, or a skunk, of polder or even a nesting place, he is neither reducing her status nor raising theirs, but tenderly expressing how for him, she and the natural world complement each other.

II

In the poems I have been discussing, the woman is presented from the man's point of view. We see her submitting to the leaf ritual, even to the suggestion of cruelty in "the tight slow burn" that will "prime" her for further impositions, but not participating in it. In the last "Glanmore Sonnet" the dreamer returns to

> Our first night years ago in that hotel
> When you came with your deliberate kiss
> To raise us towards the lovely and painful
> Covenants of flesh . . .

The reference to Wyatt's poem implies not only their intimacy, and her willingness to "put herself in danger", but also the "strange fashion" of "our separateness". This woman who came with a "deliberate kiss" is not passive, not a stained image of perfection, but a person with her own identity and needs and opinions. He understands that while his life may go forward with her, he cannot go through her. In "A Dream of Jealousy" her "wounded stare" is eloquent, although she says nothing. But in another fantasy, the poem "An Afterwards", he gives her a voice to speak her mind.

Beneath its wry humour, this poem can be read as an "afterword", a reconsideration of the terms of their relationship. Here we see that the circle has narrowed; what is under consideration is not the tension between poet and member of a community but poet and family man—husband and father. Heaney imaginatively steps out of his life and looks on as his widow administers the final judgment: "She would plunge all poets"—not just him—"in the ninth circle" (the part of Dante's hell reserved for "those treacherous shades who murderously violated family

bonds"[2]) and would condemn them to feed off each other in death as they did in life,

> Lockjawed, mantrapped, each a fastened badger
> Jockeying for position, hasped and mounted
> Like Ugolino on Archbishop Roger.

This is strong language, to express strong feeling. "An Afterwards" sums up the failure of a life in which everything has to be grist to the poetic mill. Heaney presents a picture of himself from his wife's point of view, passing his life cut off from the family, while he cannibalizes other poets and offers her and their children only the "left"-overs.

> . . . 'I have closed my widowed ears
> To the sulphurous news of poets and poetry.
> Why could you not have, oftener, in our years
>
> Unclenched, and come down laughing from your room
> And walked the twilight with me and your children—
> Like that one evening of elder bloom
> And hay, when the wild roses were fading?'

In giving his wife the clear insight that if he stopped trying to be the poet first, and put being a human being before it, he would be there for her and the family, and for himself, Heaney conveys his realization more certainly than if he had expressed it in his own voice. He sees the absurdity of worrying about "news of poets and poetry" when doing so has damned him to be buried up to the neck in an ice-bound lake for all eternity.

> And when she'd make her circuit of the ice,
> Aided and abetted by Virgil's wife,
> I would cry out, 'My sweet, who wears the bays
> In our green land above, whose is the life
>
> Most dedicated and exemplary?'

While this poor soul may still equate "the life/Most dedicated and exemplary" with the person "who wears the bays", the living poet perceives the distinction. But while he recognizes the truth of the

---

[2]Mark Musa, *Dante's* Inferno (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1971), p.269.

woman's accusation, he also knows that he must maintain a Wordsworthian "egotis[m]" and "separateness" if he is not to lose the edge which enables him to write poetry. What from her point of view looks like insatiable hunger can, if seen from another perspective, be commitment. Even the hell to which he condemns himself, through her, and which he has indeed taken from Dante, is a circle which encloses and separates him from other suffering souls.

In the final stanza he eases up on himself and suggests that he "left" feeding off other poets and became fed upon, in turn; and here he does lose some of that edge:

> And (as some maker gaffs me in the neck)
> 'You weren't the worst. You aspired to a kind,
> Indifferent, faults-on-both-sides tact.
> You left us first, and then those books, behind.'

Heaney is preoccupied with feeling different, rather than "Indifferent". But does he deserve the earlier, more bitter indictment? The "Sybil" in the poem of that name does not limit the less-than-human, "rabid egotistical daisy-chain" to poets. In reply to the question "What will become of us?" she envisages "Dogs in a siege. Saurian relapses. Pismires." She foresees hope only if there is "forgiveness", if divisions are dissolved and new life redeemed from violence:

> Unless forgiveness finds its nerve and voice,
> Unless the helmeted and bleeding tree
> Can green and open buds like infants' fists
> And the fouled magma incubate
>
> Bright nymphs. . . .

This vision of social possibilities is like his vision of new possibilities in poetry—"art a paradigm of earth new from the lathe of ploughs." The Sybil wants to see a return to the simple "good life", a retrieval of innocence through people reaffirming contact with the innocent natural

world. *Field Work* opens with "Oysters", a poem about an attempt to re-establish this contact. The speaker makes a trip to the coast to share a meal with friends, and his first taste of oysters seems to fulfil his desire to rediscover his connection with the universe:

> My tongue was a filling estuary,
> My palate hung with starlight:
> As I tasted the salty Pleiades
> Orion dipped his foot into the water.

The great hunter Orion could walk on the sea-bed and still keep his head above water, but he was a god. Heaney too is a hunter of sorts, but he is a man, and as he absorbs the world's innocence it combines with his own guilty saliva. He consumes all the myths of the ocean, all the life-history of the oysters, and that experience brings him back to the recognition that in the human world, too, people are "Alive and violated", with "Millions of them ripped and shucked and scattered" as a result of man's insatiable greed. His attempt to "Lay . . . down a perfect memory" is thwarted by the sight of the oysters as they "lay on their beds of ice", waiting to be eaten alive. No memory is perfect, unless it is selective. Heaney pushes that impinging recognition back into history in the description of the Romans' sickening ("Glut" and "disgorge") over-indulgence of their appetite for oysters. But he cannot deny his complicity in that "Glut of privilege"; he simply cannot both claim connection with the oysters and bypass any responsibility for what people have done, and continue to do, out of greed. He expresses anger at this failure to "repose", to re-position, his "trust" in "the clear light, like poetry or freedom"; there is no "repose", no rest from his sense of responsibility.

But there is no easy way to catch either "poetry or freedom", however close they may seem, "Leaning in from the sea" so enticingly. The final lines reveal that it is as a *poet* he wishes to be renewed.

I ate the day
Deliberately, that its tang
Might quicken me all into verb, pure verb.

According to one critic, "the poem does not advance into unknown territory, it circles elegantly around on itself until it ends where it began, with language".[3] But there is a difference in the attitude to language at the end. The word "Deliberately" points to a choice: the poet is not so much savouring the experience as a discovery, as willing it to be significant. Here he expresses an intention to consume all of "the day", its yearnings and its realizations, so that (like the aphrodisiac quality associated with oysters) it might heighten his powers as a poet. He knows that there is no way back to "pure" innocence, but determines to extract from the experience the pearl he desires, "quicken[ed]" language. Language, the words for things, matters more to him than the reality he felt in his own two hands, tasted in his own mouth. This is what he accuses himself of, through the mouth of his wife in "An Afterwards", and it is a dilemma he explores right through the volume, from the experience of man feeding on "Oysters" to the final poem, "Ugolino", a translation of Dante's ugly vision of man eating man.

Neil Corcoran observes that Dante is in fact "the major poetic presence in *Field Work*", and among the allusions he notes throughout the volume, the first is to "the epigraph (from the *Purgatorio*) to 'The Strand at Lough Beg', and . . . that poem's haunting conclusion, where Heaney wipes his murdered cousin's face with dew and moss, as Dante wipes Virgil's face at the opening of the *Purgatorio* itself" (p.129). But the Dantean references in this elegy, a poem whose beauty seems a poetic counterweight to the horrors of "Ugolino", are more pervasive, and more

[3]A. Alvarez, "A Fine Way With the Language," *The New York Review of Books*, 6 March 1980, pp.16-17.

puzzling, than Corcoran suggests. The epigraph suggests that Heaney is taking the long view:

> All round this little island, on the strand
> Far down below there, where the breakers strive,
> Grow the tall rushes from the oozy sand.

But in the poem Heaney does not simply look to Dante for distance, or to recall that sectarian killings are not the exclusive property of one culture. And while the ending does suggest that the victim whose face he (Heaney/Dante, the living poet) dabs is his Virgil-like guide through his own particular purgatory, in the opening lines it is the murdered man who is the "pilgrim". It is not at all clear who is the guide, and who is guided, or indeed whether one or both of them have left the Inferno behind. But what the poem as a whole does manifest is Heaney's "surrender" to Dante (like his surrender to Wordsworth in the "Glanmore Sonnets") as the guide of his poetic voice.

The opening lines describing the victim's last journey seem to point directly to the first Canto of the *Purgatorio*, cited in the epigraph, where Dante cries "Here let death's poetry arise to life". McCartney is pictured leaving the cold "white glow of filling stations" to climb uphill "out beneath the stars" along a "high, bare pilgrim's track", rather as Dante, "free of the deathly atmosphere/that had weighed heavy on [his] eyes and heart", begins his ascent of Purgatory with a description of the starry heavens above him. The comparison with Dante is complicated by the suggestion that in following this "track", according to local lore the path "Where Sweeney fled" after his banishment, McCartney too was in flight. But it is unclear what relationship McCartney bears to Sweeney (the mad king of Irish mythology who was turned into a bird, a version of whose

story Heaney offers in *Sweeney Astray*[4]). Sweeney fled as a result of his own action (he had been cursed for throwing the cleric Ronan's psalter into the lake), whereas the only act McCartney committed was to venture into unfamiliar territory. Yet the connection between these two figures is repeated in the following lines, where the "bloodied heads . . . and dogs' eyes . . . /Blazing out of the ground" to face Sweeney, and the sound of their "snapping and squealing", are coupled with the "red lamp" that "blazed ahead" of McCartney, and the "sudden brakes and stalling/Engine"of the disembodied figures with their "heads hooded". This sounds more like a scene from the *Inferno* than from the "little island" where the rushes grow (Canto 32, l.70, for instance.).

The second stanza is set in Ireland, and the remembered noise of the duck-shooters' guns is more than a childhood intimation of McCartney's violent end. The duck-shooters are the "chosen people" of "The Other Side", the "patriarchal" invaders, and the description of their cartridges as "genital, ejected" is itself a somewhat intrusive allusion to their rape of Ireland. By contrast with them, the peasant farmers, "shy", quiet "feelers round/Haycocks and hindquarters", who have something of the bovine quality of their herds, are the subject of the poet's (unlikely) identification:

> . . . you and yours and yours and mine fought shy,
> Spoke an old language of conspirators
> And could not crack the whip or seize the day . . .

The negative side of this placid ruminative way of life is that by closing their ranks, excluding the outsiders, these parochial "scullions" are at least partly responsible for the lack of unity that brought about McCartney's death.

---

[4]*Sweeney Astray* (London: Faber and Faber, 1983.)

In the final stanza, where Lough Beg is presented as an untroubled, idyllic paradise, the poem returns to Dante. The use of the present tense, the absence of punctuated pauses, and the visual image of the "unbewildered" cattle "Up to their bellies in an early mist"—weightless, suspended—suggest a timeless state. But Lough Beg is not the earthly paradise: the calm is disturbed, even as it is being unfolded, by a struggling sound in the line "To where we work our way through squeaky sedge", and the ominous, equivocal note in "Drowning in dew" is picked up in the image of the strand as a deceptively sharp knife, challenging the suggestions of safety and calm. Heaney is not "in between" here: he wants both the reality of treacherous, divided Ireland and the solace of a land unaffected by the doings of men. His last lines imagine McCartney's actual dying moments in a poetic time and place which is beyond the reach of treachery and divisions:

> I turn because the sweeping of your feet
> Has stopped behind me, to find you on your knees
> With blood and roadside muck in your hair and eyes,
> Then kneel in front of you in brimming grass
> And gather up cold handfuls of the dew
> To wash you, cousin. I dab you clean with moss
> Fine as the drizzle out of a low cloud.
> With rushes that shoot green again, I plait
> Green scapulars to wear over your shroud.

Here is a fusion of the images from Dante (which Corcoran notes) with images from the cousins' Irish Catholic childhood. The "muck" and the "moss", the plaited reeds (like Brigid's crosses), the "scapulars" and the faintly ecclesiastical pattern of the ritual: "I turn . . . kneel . . . wash . . . I dab . . . I lift . . . I plait" give the passage its local feel. The "brimming grass" and the "Fine . . . drizzle out of a low cloud" are also familiarly Irish. And here is Dante:

> We made our way along that lonely plain
> like men who seek the right path they have lost,
> counting each path a loss till it is found.[5]

Why did Heaney feel the need to structure this elegy on a Dantean base? If we examine the Canto to which he directs us, in the epigraph, a number of clues emerge.

First, the rushes provide an image of pliability, flexibility, the capacity to "yield to buffeting" (l.105), which is so necessary when faced with senseless deaths like that of McCartney; and Heaney characteristically fears that to "harden" into a single response would mean to be disabled as a poet. Cato tells Virgil, "No other plant producing leaves or stalk/that hardens could survive in such a place" (ll.103-04). Secondly, Heaney wants to retrieve from the loss of his cousin's life some gain in his own pilgrimage, some guidance; Virgil's words offer some consolation—"there was no other way to save his soul/than by my guiding him along this road" (ll.62-3). He converts his cousin into a Virgil-figure in the hope that he might understand, as Virgil did of Dante, that "he goes/in search of freedom, and how dear that is,/the man who gives up life for it well knows" (ll.70-72). Above all, Heaney looks to Dante, as to Wordsworth, as a way back into language which will capture the secret meaning of life. But

> 'These thing are not secrets but mysteries,'
> Oisin Kelly told me years ago
> In Belfast, hankering after stone
> That connived with the chisel, as if the grain
> Remembered what the mallet tapped to know.
> ("Glanmore Sonnet II")

The harder Heaney tries, "deliberately", for the right language, the right cadence, the right movement to catch the sensations and aspirations of an

---

[5]*Purgatory*, trans. Mark Musa (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1981), p.4 (Canto I, ll. 118-20). The references to Dante which follow are to this Canto.

experience, the greater the risk he runs of "pinning them down", of being cursed, like the "Thatcher", with a "Midas touch". Poetry can catch a glimpse of the elusive mystery, if we are lucky, and just touching the truth at a tangent is enough "to set the darkness echoing". But Heaney at this stage is torn between following a private poetry of "surrender" and responding to an inner compunction to write poetry which speaks out about, and fights back against, life's injustices. He admires both processes in other artists, responding to Sean O'Riada's way of composing—
" 'Sometimes I just lie out/like ballast in the bottom of the boat/listening to the cuckoo' "(p.29)—and also to Robert Lowell's way of "promulgating art's/deliberate, peremptory/love and arrogance" (p.31). In Dante he finds both, and if he is guilty of "tonguing for [Dante's] brain", it is because he wants to learn from him.

The "Elegy" to Lowell begins with the statement

> The way we are living,
> timorous or bold,
> will have been our life.

Heaney fears that he can be too "timorous", but his attempts to be "bold" are not always completely successful; we see this in the poem "The Toome Road", for instance. The scene is back in Heaney's "original townland", with the speaker figuring as the only wakeful person in a nightmare landscape where armoured cars warble in place of birds, and "alder branches" are broken to camouflage the cars as living trees. He has "rights-of-way, fields, cattle in [his] keeping" and resents these intruders, whose presence seems to come as a surprise to him, as if up to now he, too, has been "sleeping":

> How long were they approaching down my roads
> As if they owned them? . . .

He sums up his "sleeping" countrymen as "Sowers of seeds, erectors of headstones", as if he expects no change in the age-old pattern. And he is unlikely to cause any change, as he makes no attempt to rouse the Irish from their sleep to inform them of the "dormant guns", choosing instead to announce to the soldiers the presence of an "untoppled omphalos" impervious to their intrusion. But his words ring as emptily as the words of Ozymandias:

> O charioteers, above your dormant guns,
> It stands here still, stands vibrant as you pass,
> The invisible, untoppled omphalos.

Neil Corcoran glosses this omphalos as "the navel of nationalist Irish feeling, maintaining . . . its persistent, defiant opposition to the colonial power" (pp.134-35). But in this sleeping scene of "buckrakes . . . /Silos, chill gates, wet slates . . . /Of outhouse roofs", the speaker's address sounds strangely formal, his language foreign, and the "omphalos" comes across as mere assertion, with no umbilical connection, as Stephen Dedalus would say, to the rest of the poem. Here is Heaney the pilot, rather than the stray, moved by his regret that life around him seems to be changing for the worse, and wanting to do something about it. In "The Singer's House" he wonders,

> What do we say any more
> to conjure the salt of our earth?
> So much comes and is gone
> that should be crystal and kept . . .

His worry about what "should be" affects his attitude to the mistiness, or the muddiness, of what is. Life as it is exudes something he knows is good for us, something not "crystal and kept" but intimate and "muddied", far from "the diamond absolutes" that still appeal to him. When he hears the

sound of a young girl's voice which "swarmed and puddled into laughs", the guttural sound soothes him. In this poem, "The Guttural Muse", he compares the "thick and comforting" voices of the "young crowd leav[ing] the discotheque" with

> . . . oily bubbles the feeding tench sent up
> That evening at dusk—the slimy tench
> Once called the 'doctor fish' because his slime
> Was said to heal the wounds of fish that touched it.

As a man, he may feel like a wounded fish, "like some old pike all badged with sores/Wanting to swim in touch with soft-mouthed life". But in the same mind, at the same time, he finds "comfort" in more hard-mouthed sounds ("tench . . . that touched it") too. As a poet he is becoming something of a doctor-fish himself: no longer just "finger[ing] slime" for his own sake, he is now bringing the reader into muddied but palpable contact with it.

III

Throughout *Field Work*, Heaney circles around these apparent contradictions, trying "to raise a voice" that will embrace them all—"A voice . . ./That might continue, hold, dispel, appease", as he puts it in the second "Glanmore Sonnet". In his search, as Timothy Kearney puts it, "public events . . . interlock painfully with the poet's domestic circuit of feeling".[6] One of the best examples of this interlocking is another elegy, "Casualty". This poem celebrates and mourns and questions the essential "separateness" which led its subject, a man "blown to bits" by a bomb, to his death. Yet while Heaney catches something of this man's individual, idiosyncratic character, he never names him, thus inclining to make him

---

[6]"The Poetry of the North: A Post-Modern Perspective," *The Crane Bag Book of Irish Studies 1977-1981*, ed. Mark Patrick Hederman and Richard Kearney (Dublin: Blackwater Press,1982), p.471.

into a type of hero: it is as if with one hand he takes away the many unheroic attributes he bestows with the other. "He would drink by himself", the poem begins, and the opening lines catch something of the man's signature: how he would

> . . . raise a weathered thumb
> Towards the high shelf,
> Calling another rum
> And blackcurrant, without
> Having to raise his voice,
> Or order a quick stout
> By a lifting of the eyes
> And a discreet dumb-show
> Of pulling off the top . . .

Even his drink, "another rum/And blackcurrant", is highly individual. The man is described as "a natural for work". A fisherman is "dole-kept" when he cannot fish—but the poem presents him as "a natural" for spending hours in the pub, too.[7] The poet tells us "I loved his whole manner", but that hardly needs stating, as the detailed description conveys the poet's delight in observing him. There is a slippery, unknowable quality suggested in the words "too sly" and "sidling tact", and a disquieting canniness in the combination of his "quick eye" and "turned observant back": this man did not miss, or reveal, very much. And the detail in these lines shows that the poet is equally "observant", and he is just as "sly" in his manner of disclosing what he has observed.

The poem goes on to draw explicit parallels between the two men. The fisherman, "Too busy with his knife" and "not meeting [the poet's] eye" would "mention" in an offhand way the subject of poetry—Heaney's "other life". In a counter-movement the poet would "by some trick"

---

[7] According to Thomas Foster (p.92), the subject of the poem is "one of the Lough Neagh fishermen, poaching eels for which a British fishing company holds the rights". This information is not supplied in the poem, but there is an implication of duplicity in the phrase "dole-kept breadwinner" which contributes to the poet's equivocal response to the fisherman.

match this obliqueness, and "switch the talk" to less intimate topics: "eels/Or lore of the horse and cart/Or the Provisionals." This apparently straightforward parallel distracts us from Heaney's way of "not meeting [the reader's] eye" while he is actually presenting himself as being "deadpan" and even "Sure-footed and too sly" in the poetry. There is an irony in the "safe" subjects he changes the conversation to: it is "the Provisionals" who turn the fisherman into the "Casualty" of the title—he becomes an anonymous victim at the hands of his own people. And the fisherman is hardly a safe topic for Heaney, as in writing about him the poet risks revealing himself.

"Sly", "sidling", slippery as an eel, the man's natural element is fluid. We see him drinking, fishing, walking in the rain. Although he is attracted to the atmosphere of the pub, temperamentally he is not a joiner—a reserve he has in common with the poet. He too shies away from the confining aspect of community obligation, the restrictions others' expectations place on his individuality. The lines describing the funeral of the Bloody Sunday victims capture that feeling of constriction, like the "ring" or torc the goddess tightened aound the neck of the Tollund Man:

> The common funeral
> Unrolled its swaddling band,
> Lapping, tightening
> Till we were braced and bound
> Like brothers in a ring.

Loyal to his own nature, he was bound not to be "bound", not to go along with the crowd. But there was a price to be paid for such "sad freedom" of choice. When he forfeited the support, security and warmth (implicit in "swaddling") to go "miles away" from the safe harbour of his own locality,

he became free for the picking. Fish swim in schools; it is when they leave the school that they are attracted by the lure:

> . . . he drank like a fish
> Nightly, naturally
> Swimming towards the lure
> Of warm lit-up places,
> The blurred mesh and murmur
> Drifting among glasses
> In the gregarious smoke.

The appropriateness of the metaphor here can easily distract the reader, as if "by some trick", from the fact that these lines put the responsibility for the fisherman's murder on his own doorstep. Here is an example of the poet avoiding meeting the eye of his material, employing some "sidling tact" himself. His is a "tentative" art, feeling his way into its subject; he needs the metaphor, as a form of self-defence, because it is the part of him that does not conform, that does not take sides, which makes it possible for him to write poetry.

He imagines the fisherman's last moments:

> I see him as he turned
> In that bombed offending place,
> Remorse fused with terror
> In his still knowable face,
> His cornered outfaced stare
> Blinding in the flash.

Here the word "offending", while it specifically refers to the place, is also connected to the man: it implies wrong-doing on his side, as well as on the side of the bombers, but the "place" is made to take the blame.

> How culpable was he
> That last night when he broke
> Our tribe's complicity?

Can anyone be blamed for being himself? But this is not the poem's question: it is concerned with the degree of his culpability. And this kind of question cannot be pushed very far before the moral terms drop out. On what scale can an individual's responsibility be measured objectively,

when action grows out of character, and character is shaped and moulded by influences which are not of the individual's own making? If the poem's question is valid, then we might ask "how culpable was" the poet, when he professedly maintained an oblique non-interaction with the fisherman; if he had conducted himself differently, might this have influenced the outcome of events? Although Heaney cannot deny the "complicity" between himself and this man, he still feels the pull of belonging to "Our tribe"—a primitive social unit, with all its taboos and corrupted values. Hearing the "sly" voice of the dead fisherman, he shares with him the understanding that there is no "right answer":

> 'Now you're supposed to be
> An educated man,'
> I hear him say. 'Puzzle me
> The right answer to that one.'

Heaney wants to find an answer to this insoluble puzzle, to push back, somehow, and find something "crystal and kept" in this moral muddiness. As the "Purring of the hearse" modulates into the "purling" of the screw, he recalls the early morning fishing trip, imagining the "freedom" the two shared stirring himself to the depths, ploughing up his own "indolent fathoms" and putting him in touch with poetry.

> that morning
> I was taken in his boat,
> The screw purling, turning
> Indolent fathoms white,
> I tasted freedom with him.
> To get out early, haul
> Steadily off the bottom,
> Dispraise the catch, and smile
> As you find a rhythm
> Working you, slow mile by mile,
> Into your proper haunt
> Somewhere, well out, beyond . . .

His farewell to the fisherman ("I missed his funeral") is this poem, these lines which show what it means to "find a rhythm/Working you", and

which attempt to combat the power of the fisherman's unanswerable question. But even here, saluted in his "proper haunt", the fisherman is not put beyond blame. The word "indolent" harks back to the description of the "dole-kept breadwinner", and there is a suggestion that his other "haunt", the pub, is not where he "proper[ly]" belonged.

What of the accusation in "An Afterwards"? Is Heaney "egotistically" consuming the fisherman's independence for the purposes of poetry? He remarked to Helen O'Shea that " 'Casualty' is a kind of Yeatsian poem—I was not unconscious of taking up the metre in 'The Fisherman'. . ."(p.14). Heaney is a member of another "tribe", the brotherhood of poets. Like Yeats, he admires those who stand out from the fray, those who set their "course/wilfully across/the ungovernable and dangerous" ("Elegy"), and he too wants

> To write for my own race
> And the reality . . .
> (*Collected Poems*, p.166)

But his admiration for the fisherman is qualified, and the basis of this reservation is that his fisherman, unlike the archetypal "wise and simple man" of Yeats's poem, is frailly and complexly human. Yeats, conscious of himself as a poet, and of his ideal audience, adopts a certain posture; he aims to write a

> Poem maybe as cold
> And passionate as the dawn.'

Heaney is not adopting a posture, but working his way to a position; and at the end of the poem he is still "plodd[ing]" through the mud, his mind far from "crystal" clear about the issues that confront him: he calls upon the shade of his alter ego to return, to provoke him further.

> Dawn-sniffing revenant
> Plodder through midnight rain,
> Question me again.

Heaney's poem is "passionate", deeply felt, but it remains "cold" in the sense that it is written behind the dead man's "turned back", as if even now he has secrets that cannot be penetrated. The passion in the poem is aroused by Heaney's own struggles, not those of the subject. None the less, it is an elegy: the subject is "kept" as a man, not transformed into a saint who gave his life for his tribe.

The amphibious eel-fisher provides a way for the poet to negotiate a path in the misty, dark and confusing area where public and private responsibilities meet. Even "The Badgers" haunt him, their presence in the garden seeming to be "some soft returning" designed to "puzzle" him with questions such as

> How perilous is it to choose
> Not to love the life we're shown?

Thomas Foster expresses a common reaction to this poem when he describes it as "a sort of political 'Road Not Taken' " (p.84). But in what sense can a person be said to "choose" in this way? Heaney looks at the badgers and thinks of how he "could have been" bent over the land instead of bent over the pen. Or, he suggests, he could have "end[ed up]" a fighter—in Foster's words, "a terrorist, perhaps, hoist on his own petard" (p.84). Is he "vaguely honoured" to be a poet? his voices whisper. Or does "choos[ing]" to be a poet cut him off from his forebears—those "wise and simple" men of the land who do not mistake animal corpses for men, or confuse the "signs" of badgers' presence with "Visitations" of "the murdered dead". The comparison arises out of Heaney's desire to use the work done in the field to talk about war.

Repeatedly, he tries to dissolve the "separateness" between these two, while at the same time valuing his own sense of separateness. But he is neither a farmer nor a badger-like "wood-kerne": for better or worse, he is

a poet, actively "listen[ing]/for duntings under the laurels" because that is his way of being: "Feeling into words", the title of an autobiographical essay (*Preoccupations*, pp.41-60), describes both what he tries to achieve and the way he goes about it. As a child he learned from nature, but in the course of a life, things change. His mind, like the land, is cultivated, and his circles have widened (from the dog on the kitchen mat to the *Divine Comedy*) as he has become exposed to the different pressures of people and ideologies. He wants to "nose . . . out what got mislaid", sensing that what is lost in one form may be available in another, but he needs a guide to lead him back. Wordsworth, Lowell and O'Riada offer a way for him to re-examine his attitudes and values: he hopes to see his own creations more plainly in "the clear light" of their achievements. But his greatest guides in *Field Work* are his wife and Dante. In concluding the volume with his own translation from the *Inferno* he brings to the fore some of the things he still needs to resolve, particularly the charge levelled at him in "An Afterwards".

Translating Dante's story of Ugolino also gives him an opportunity to render dramatically the intensity of the "intimate, almost carnal" feuds in Belfast which, he thinks, mesh with those in Dante's Pisa.[8] Ugolino's punishment, the continuous devouring of Archbishop Roger, ensures that he can never forget the horror and grief of seeing his own "young and innocent" sons starve to death. While Heaney recognizes the importance of forgetting in order for life to go on, he also understands the strength of bonds of continuity. Because Ugolino betrayed this bond, he had to endure pain in life as well as in death: not just the pain of hunger, but the pain of hearing his starving children offer themselves to him.

---

[8]Dillon Johnston, *Irish Poetry After Joyce* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 1985), p.157.

> . . . "Father, it will greatly ease our pain
> If you eat us instead, and you who dressed us
> In this sad flesh undress us here again."

It is clear that all these ideas draw Heaney to this passage. But translating someone else's poetry does not "puzzle [him] the answer" to his own questions. When Ugolino interrupts his story to insist that "if you are not crying, you are hardhearted", he seems to be demanding rather than arousing a particular response, and this is also the effect of Heaney's translation. In the end, this poem remains at a remove from his own experience, rather as the frozen chamber of horrors in which it is set in the *Inferno* works against the idea that human involvement is possible. *Field Work* records how each of Heaney's attempts to "lay . . . down a perfect memory" is frustrated by the "complicity" he detects between his own poetic acts and the acts of others in the name of commitment to some choice. While relying on other poets helps him to see more clearly the horns of the dilemma he is stuck on, in order to move on he must recall, and apply, the advice that was given to him back "in 1962":

> . . . Listen. Go your own way.
> Do your own work. . . .
> (*North*, p.71)

He knows that this is not easy. The poems in "Triptych" chart the slow pace of such progress when an impulse toward change and growth is resisted by a penitential urge to retreat:

> . . . Everything in me
> Wanted to bow down, to offer up,
> To go barefoot, foetal and penitential,
>
> And pray at the water's edge.

Heaney's next volume, *Station Island*, sees him lean back against the equivocation that plagues his attempts to cross the field, and shows him making his own "scared irrevocable steps".

What an abyss of uncertainty, whenever the mind feels that some part of it has strayed beyond its own borders; when it, the seeker, is at the same time the dark region through which it must go seeking . . .

Seek? More than that: create. It is face to face with something which does not so far exist, to which it alone can give reality and substance, which it alone can bring into the light of day.

Marcel Proust
*Swann's Way*

## *CHAPTER FIVE*

## Heaney's Returns:

## *Station Island*

> . . . The very ivy
> puzzled its milk-tooth frills and tapers
> over the grain . . .

These lines from "In the Beech" (p.100), might stand as a metaphor for the imperceptible yet insistent movement of Heaney's own exploratory, "tentative art" in *Station Island*. Even the repeated sounds here ("The very ivy") catch the sense of something turning into and entwining around itself as it tries to get a grip on tree or wall. The path the plant has traced is often hidden by the frilly leaves, and some critics consider that Heaney's energy in *Station Island* goes into displaying the frills at the expense of making any real progress. Michael Hulse, for example, charges the poet with being "self-admiring" and "insistent on his own status" in this volume. But a close study of these poems shows that Heaney does not simply "grope along the grain" of language: like the ivy, he needs those teeth ("milk teeth" they may be) to take him forward as he continues to explore where he stands as a man and as a poet, approaching the question from all sides and angles.

The volume is divided into three sections, each of which informs the others. Part I is an untitled collection of short lyrics; Part II, "Station Island", presents the poet as a guilt-ridden pilgrim trying to face up to and resolve the aesthetic and moral questions that confront him; and Part III, "Sweeney Redivivus", is a series of poems which Heaney describes as "voiced for Sweeney", the legendary king whose transformation into a bird, while it enabled him to fly, also broke the bonds that tied him to his

own people. Station Island is Heaney's biggest volume to date, and its three parts are so distinct that in some ways it reads like three volumes in one, challenging the critic to discover the relationships between the parts.

It is tempting to read the three clearly-defined sections as three stages in Heaney's poetic development: an initial selection of the kind of poetry he has written so far, followed by a descent into a personal underworld where honest self-scrutiny leads to a form of rebirth, which in turn makes possible the imaginative flight of the final section. But here, as in Heaney's poetry as a whole, the notion of linear progression is too programmatic for the diversity the poetry manifests. There are examples in Part I of both guilty remembering and carefree flight; the central section is not all guilt and gravity—it includes imaginative leaps as well as some self-puncturing insights; and in the final section Sweeney's capacities as a bird are an addition to, not a replacement for, his human attachment to "the earth's long contour". As is the case in Heaney's work as a whole, the shape of *Station Island* is closer to a circle than to a straight line. Again and again, throughout the volume, Heaney returns to earlier experiences or discoveries and his explorations find new meanings and release.

## I

In the lyrics of the unnamed first section we recognize the old Heaney, but these poems do not merely work old ground, as some critics argue. Ronald Tamplin, for example, regards the poems in Part I as a disconnected group, lacking originality and freshness, and even representing Heaney's farewell to this particular mode of writing. He describes them as "like so many dogs running in the same colours and bursting from the same traps", and goes on to interpret Heaney's purpose in placing these poems at the beginning

of *Station Island* to be an intentional "drawing together and using up of the themes and manners of the past, an act of clearance" (p. 90). This way of looking at the poems allows their similarities to Heaney's earlier work to obscure important differences not only in tone but in attitude and achievement. Through the very act of writing his earlier poems, Heaney has acquired a new degree of self-consciousness, and the results are mixed; Part I of this volume contains some poems which are more complex, and some which are simpler, than any he has written before. My argument that these poems are neither a "farewell" to, nor a repetition of, an earlier mode can be illustrated by a close reading of "Away from it All". In many ways reminiscent of "Oysters" (*Field Work*), this later poem is more probing, more self-conscious, and willing to recognize confusion as part of the condition of living (rather than something to be "angry" about).

Like "Oysters", "Away from it All" conveys a yearning for the fresh and unpredictable, for an escape from the responsibilities and cares of a life "mired in attachment" ("The First Flight"). But written into the very expression of the phrase "away from it all" is a recognition of the vanity of such yearning, and the poem explores these tensions and ironies. The situation this poem describes is also similar to that in "Oysters". Here, a group of friends savour a special-occasion meal of lobster "In full view of the strand", on home ground, cosily removed from "the sea wind spitting on the big window", yet able to enjoy its effects. The poem catches the way the twilight seems to last forever, as if time were suspended, while the friends talk the evening through. There is no need to go anywhere to feel "away from it all": here, "in their element", they make their escape into the relaxation of each others' company. But at the same time the poem sees that they do not really get "away from it all". It contrasts the speaker's more

complex understanding with the simple pleasure of the friends. They may seem to be oblivious to the contempt and scorn of "the sea wind spitting on the big window" (the glass is a form of protection, or fortification—their own carapace), but the speaker at least understands that they cut themselves off from the rest of the natural world by this act of plunder and cruelty, this reminder of the savage within man.[1] So far, this seems very close to "Oysters", where the "I" who "was angry" is marked off from the others who took a more carefree pleasure in the meal. But here, the "I" is also distinct from the poet: the essential difference between "Away From it All" and "Oysters" is that the later poem sees more deeply than its speaker, in that the poet can see what the speaker cannot—the identification of the speaker with the lobster.

The speaker's vision, at the time of the meal, is itself quite complex. He is aware, for instance, of the irony that the lobster's natural defence—its shell being the colour and texture of "a rainy stone", hiding the fact that it is alive—is taken as an excuse for the friends to kill it; their alibi is that it appears inanimate. There is also the suggestion that, carried out "In full view of the strand", this is an act of defiance, a suggestion picked up in the deliberately unrepentant announcement: "we plunged and reddened it". So the speaker's words "And more power to us, my friend", signal more than a hearty cameraderie: they protest too much, and the slightly awkward tone comes from an attempt to justify their action because they are "hard at it", and "in earnest". This meeting is, after all, presented as a serious business, where an elect group, sitting "in conclave", search for a key to important philosophical and aesthetic questions—while together they

---

[1] cf. "Sandstone Keepsake", where plucking an actual stone from the bed of a lake is implied to be an act of violation, as the stone becomes a victim's heart in the speaker's imagination. This interest in the fusion between man and nature is one of the threads running through *Station Island*.

cleave asunder the body of the lobster and consume it, down to "the dregs". The speaker wonders whether in enjoying this meal they are guilty of consuming the world for their own greedy purposes.

> It was twilight, twilight, twilight
> as the questions hopped and rooted.
> It was oarsmen's backs and oars
> hauled against and lifting.
> And more power to us, my friend,
>
> hard at it over the dregs,
> laying in in earnest
> as the sea darkens
> and whitens and darkens
> and quotations start to rise . . .

The tension between the contrasting ways of "reading" this event is emphasized by the everchanging aspect of the sea which "darkens/and whitens and darkens", resisting any fixed position. Just as standing water stagnates, the mind too must be in perpetual motion if it is to remain alive. The friends seem paradoxically trapped in their mental exertions; like the oarsmen, the harder they try the less distance they seem to cover. Discussing the conflicting pressures on the writer, they are in their element, and "quotations start to rise"—as if of their own volition. Quotations (the words of others) enter the conversation because they offer a way of understanding through someone else's experience. In a way, quotations are another form of protection; they are "like . . . alibis". "Alibi", from Latin, literally means "elsewhere". "I was elsewhere", we say, "away from it all", when we wish to prove our innocence. But an alibi which has to be "rehearsed" surely implies guilt. Who, then, are these quotations trying to deceive? Heaney incorporates into the poem a prose quotation from Milosz.

> *I was stretched between contemplation*
> *of a motionless point*
> *and the command to participate*
> *actively in history.*

He has previously explored and manifested such stretching in his poetry—in "Punishment" and "Exposure", for example. Instead of being accepted as a telling articulation of the artists' dilemma, the quotation from Milosz is interrogated: " '*Actively*? What do you mean?' " "Actively" is indeed the key word here. Is it enough to "participate . . . in history" simply by being alive, or even by wondering about such questions, as the speaker does? The "motionless point" which the speaker contemplates is the awareness that he and his friends are trapped (as if they have built a tank around themselves) in the belief that they can think and talk about these problems as if they were "elsewhere", and that talking about them is not *doing* anything to change "history".

This is familiar Heaney terrain, and the critic might ask, once again, whether by raising this question in a poem, without offering any route by which it could be answered, the poet is being evasive, or unremittingly honest. But the "motionless point" that the poem contemplates includes the significance of the speaker having that thought at that particular moment in history. The Milosz quotation naturally raises for Heaney the question of what it means to "participate actively", and why that command would apply to him in the same way as it applies to a poet in a totalitarian regime, where concepts such as "goodness" and "truth" are in danger of being destroyed, and where the onus is on the poet to be a witness and to speak the truth. Heaney is not being evasive; he sees that whatever political resemblances there may be between Northern Ireland and Eastern Europe, the size of the cause in Northern Ireland is smaller, and the "command" is less total. Nevertheless, this recognition of difference does not answer the poet's question, which is whether this poem counts as an active participation in history. In ending the poem with the word

"bewildered" he expresses some doubt about whether he has got any further: has this attempt to explore his predicament (both poetically and personally) left him, once again, "in between", trying to "Puzzle . . . The right answer"? At the same time, he is "fortified" by the realization that engaging with this issue is like straying into "The Plantation", where certainty and security are not possible. Being deceived or confused is inevitable where everything "Miss[es] its last definition" ("Bogland"), and apparently clear distinctions between killer and victim, nature and culture, isolation and community blur into each other, just as the sea's darkening and whitening and darkening manifests not opposition but wholeness. This is not a new discovery for Heaney, but one he "had to come back" to recover at a new level. Terence Brown quotes Heaney at a poetry reading in 1972 saying that writing poetry involves "being able to conduct yourself between the dark and the light in your head, not trusting or committing yourself to one or the other".[2] What Heaney offers in this poem is a "motionless point" where the vision of the speaker, and the vision of the poet conducting himself between the dark and the light in his head, come together in each realizing, in different ways, the truth of Milosz's remark.

The lyrics in Part I of *Station Island* include a number of attempts to seek meaning in the elusive motionless points of a life. These poems direct attention, not evasively or wearily "away from" this world, but to the actualities of life in this time-bound world, seen in relation to the timelessness of eternity. This is where the gaze of the poem follows the old man in "Last Look". He is like one of Wordsworth's country-men—Michael, for instance, or the Leech-gatherer. His attachment to his place is such that he seems literally to grow out of it, with "his trouser bottoms

---

[2]*Northern Voices: Poets from Ulster*, (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1975), p.183.

wet/and flecked with grass seed." And the place seems attached to him: the weeds flail against the intruding car, and he is compared not only to some wool which a sheep leaves on barbed wire as a trace of its being there, but also to

> . . . an old lock of hay
> combed from a passing load
> by a bush in the roadside.

There is a suggestion here of the bush's claiming that "lock of hay", and keeping it as a souvenir of the old man's passing, as if it were a lock of hair. Nothing can dislodge his attachment—even the goddess who can bestow immortality cannot woo him to "come away"[3] from it all. While the "covert" of his gaze suggests how engrossed and impervious to distraction he is, it is also an image of the privacy and even secretiveness of his vision. A certain vulnerability attaches to such motionless points in a life; they are exposed only at the risk of imperilling their wonder. The poem subtly suggests what Heaney sees from the covert of *his* gaze. The essential mystery and translucence of the moment is conveyed without being defined too clearly.

In "Making Strange", Heaney further explores the elusiveness and mystery of this sense of oneness with the land. This poem is often read as a record of poetry's power to defamiliarize the tiredly familiar, to "make it new"; but the poem actually manifests the impossibility of establishing this mystery by a mere act of will. The poem personifies different ways of seeing the world in two figures, one "with his travelled intelligence" and the other "unshorn and bewildered/in the tubs of his wellingtons", with the speaker positioned "between them". Although these are sometimes

---

[3]In Irish folklore Niamh rode up from the sea and lured Oisin to follow her, "with quenchless gaze", to the land of eternal youth. Yeats describes her inviting ways in "The Wanderings of Oisin" (*Collected Poems*, p.409), and gives her a voice in "The Hosting of the Sidhe": "Away, come away:/Empty your heart of its mortal dream." (p.61).

regarded as "two sides of the poet's personality",[4] neither the "tawny" stranger's speech, "like the twang of a bowstring", nor the contrasting comical dumbness of the sheep-like native countryman captures the essentially secretive nature of the poet. Somehow, by being in between them he is hidden; he shows only these two who depend on his art. But how can his art reconcile them, what words can he possibly find to bridge the gap between these two? As if on cue, the voice comes "out of the field across the road"—a voice from the land which, curiously, the local countryman cannot hear; it is for the poet's ears only, presumably the voice of his Muse. It is a "cunning middle voice": cunning in the sense that it offers a solution to an apparently insoluble problem, but cunning too, perhaps, in that it may be deceiving the person who hears it—and it may even trick the reader. You are not obliged to choose, the voice implies; you can have your cake and eat it:

> . . . 'Be adept and be dialect,
> tell of this wind coming past the zinc hut,
>
> call me sweetbriar after the rain
> or snowberries cooled in the fog.
> But love the cut of this travelled one
> and call me also the cornfield of Boaz.

The advice which the poet voices for himself here offers a foretaste of the "Station Island" sequence, not only in its tendency to render itself unnecessary (the sharp sweetness of the landscape having already been conveyed), but also in its assessment or valuing of the poet's previous achievement.

> Go beyond what's reliable . . .
> and recollect how bold you were
>
> When I visited you first
> with departures you cannot go back on.'

---

[4]Andrews, *Seamus Heaney*, p.117.

The self-referential note here represents one such departure: he cannot go back to an unselfconscious simplicity. Whether these lines are imagined to be spoken by the land itself, or to be carried on the wind, it is not at all clear why the speaker's early endeavours should be labelled as "bold". The very fact that he singles out "boldness" as a distinctive strength indicates what he wants his poetry to be. We realize that it is the beauty of Heaney's language, rather than any boldness, which can bring these two figures together.

But if on the one hand the poem seems to have its hand too tightly on the tiller, on the other the speaker is presented as passive, "straying" like a leaf in the wind, or responding like an automaton to the "flick" of a switch:

> A chaffinch flicked from an ash and next thing
> I found myself driving the stranger
>
> through my own country, adept
> at dialect, reciting my pride
> in all that I knew, that began to make strange
> at that same recitation.

The poem initially suggests that following the voice's advice leads to success in making the familiar strange; this reading is summed up by Elmer Andrews:

> In the structure and beat of these [last five] lines we recognize the rhythm of incipient flight. There is a mounting impetuousness and headiness, an intoxication, which is the impulse to make strange or, as the Russian formalists would say, to defamiliarize; an unruly energy which threatens to disrupt the poem's comforting authority. (pp. 177-78)

Yet it is clear that this landscape is not the speaker's "own country" in the same way that the country gazed on by the old man in "Last Look" was in his possession. By aligning himself with both figures at the beginning of this poem, the speaker has both laid claim to the place and declared himself a stranger to it. This element of estrangement is emphasized by the fact that he does not take the advice to be both "adept" and "dialect". He presents

himself as "adept/*at* dialect" (another self-evaluation), but unable to communicate the bond between man and landscape evoked in "Last Look". He can only "recit[e]" his "pride" in all that he "knew"—and it is not clear whether the past tense here suggests something still known or merely recited from memory.

While the expression "to make strange" may indeed suggest a defamiliarization which illuminates, it also means to choose to keep one's distance. The climax of the poem can be read as a defeat as much as a victory for the speaker: when he departs from his Muse's advice, she steps away from him. Rather than recognizing with Andrews the "rhythm of incipient flight", I detect in these final lines a weakening of power, a failure on the part of the speaker to transcend the difficulties inherent in "retracing the path back", trying to be both pilot and stray in his "own country". Heaney, the poet, knows that the "country" of the poem's "adept" speaker is language—and language tricks him, transforming his assumed "adeptness at dialect" into mere "recitation". The poem is a wry acknowledgement that in the willed act of asserting power over language, that power can slip away from the poet.

This section of *Station Island* also contains a number of poems which look back to earlier phases in the poet's life, and again, while this is characteristic of Heaney's poetry, these poems are marked by his new degree of self-consciousness. The opening poem, "The Underground", dramatizes a journey along the twin tracks of marriage, contrasting the "now" of the second half of the poem with the "then" of the first two stanzas, but despite the sense of loss that is registered by this contrast, something of the verve and sexual energy of the first part is still alive and resistant at the end of the poem, fundamentally unchanged.

The first part of the poem captures a moment which, with its dynamics of attraction and resistance, brings to life something of the reason we are male and female. A "Honeymooning" couple, with all that word's connotations of a carefree interlude of togetherness, are late for a concert—not an intensely significant event, though the couple respond playfully as if it were, for they feel like gods. But the poem makes clear that they are mortal, and while their heightened awareness and joy are caught in the fleetness of the rhythms and the energy of the language, there is nonetheless a struggle for dominance—a race and a chase—going on. Both run through the tunnel, the woman "speeding ahead" of the man in her "going-away coat", her buttons springing off as if to suggest her rejection of restraint or constraint, her desire to be a free spirit even within the bonds of this union. She is pursued by the husband who is spurred on by his desire to reach her before she "turned to a reed", to save her in her own form. (The poem actually changes her form, metamorphoses her into "some new white flower japped with crimson", as this strong visual image is made even more powerful by the flapping, japping almost electrically-charged sounds in the second stanza.) The speaker's words suggest how easily he narrowed the distance between them: we can almost hear him gain power by a mental change of gear: "And me, me then like a fleet god gaining. . .". But the word "then" in this line suggests more than an impediment he overcomes; it hints at the loss of some of that fleetness.

The significant moment of their honeymoon, the race they ran through the underground tunnel, is inscribed into their marriage. In the second half of the poem, as the "echoes die", the man tries to "Retrac[e] the path back". The change in light, from "moonlit" to "lamplit", suggests that his earlier sense of oneness with the world (including the world of the

imagination which allowed them easy access to the ways of gods and nymphs) has gone. Now the underground station is like some surreal pathway that he is drawn back into, in an attempt to recapture the optimism and trust with which they set forth into the unknown country of a new marriage, without any pilot beyond themselves and without crippling anxiety about straying. The fleet god of the beginning has modulated into Orpheus, whose music could charm the rocks and stones, but whose need of his dryad-wife Eurydice was so great that he ventured into the Underground and begged the gods to restore her to him. And the pace of the second half of the poem is slower, less driven than the first half, as if the speaker is less trusting in possibilities. Even so, the energy of the opening lines, where masculine and feminine elements each resist the pull of the other to subsume it, comes through at the end of the poem, where the Orpheus-figure returns—"as Hansel", who with courage and enterprise found a way back to a "home" where he was unwanted—to the underground station in search of what has been lost. Tense with waiting for her and fretting at his constraints, he nevertheless feels, like Orpheus, that life without this woman would not be worth living.

Heaney has in the past explored the equivocal nature of looking back: how memory is, literally, a vital function, enabling us to relate experiences to each other, but also putting between the past and the present a veil through which only certain edited items are allowed to penetrate to the conscious mind. In this poem, where he wittily suggests how the speaker is both damned if he does look back, and damned if he does not, his touch is lighter than before. He seems less freighted with the worries and "responsible *tristia*" that exercise such a gravitational pull on some of his earlier poems, and that continue to weigh down some of the poems in this

volume. Even when his touch is at its lightest, his characteristic seriousness is never far away. We see this in his poem about the lovely seriousness of children at play, "The Railway Children".

The poem, one of the finest in the volume, catches a state of innocence and trust which allows the translucent quality in everything to be seen. The railway children make no distinction between the natural and the man-made features of the landscape: they freely embrace the evidence of industrialization as part of their world, as indeed it is. If in one sense they have never known an unspoiled paradise, in another sense they create, or find it, all about them. The tracks, the slopes, the cutting, the poles and wires inspire the children, allow them to miniaturize their already "small" selves in order to enter the tunnels of their imagination.

> We were small and thought we knew nothing
> Worth knowing. . . .

The sense of their own insignificance is, paradoxically, liberating. Rather than feel their ignorance as a burden (these children whose sense of a "burden" anyhow was no heavier than swallows on a power cable), they simply accepted it. For them, whatever was "worth knowing" in the adult world was beyond them in every sense—irrelevant to the life they lived freshly and spontaneously. Instinctively, they were in touch with a different kind of "knowing", with life as a familiar yet mysterious process that might be represented by the railway tracks or the "sizzling" lines that "curved for miles" in both directions, transmitting power to places, and in ways, that they accepted as "beyond" them. Their lack of anxiety about the unknown, and their unburdened trust in the richness of life as they knew it—these provided the golden key by which they could transform the world.

> . . . We thought words travelled the wires
> In the shiny pouches of raindrops,
>
> Each one seeded full with the light
> Of the sky, the gleam of the lines, and ourselves . . .

The poem presents the world as it appeared to the children: urgently alive with meaning which is lost to adults, and for which we yearn with a forlorn sense of estrangement. Like the children, the poet miniaturizes himself. He returns imaginatively to a time when he was childlike enough to enter into such imaginings, and in his poem actually fulfils the promise of the seeded raindrops. Little did this railway child know that the words held in the shiny pouches were to be his own: now he sends word-impulses out along lines of poetry, and those lines can take the reader in turn into the form of the children, allowing us to see through their eyes even while our eyes remain our own. For the "seeds" nurtured in each of the lovely "pouches" were the children themselves, their "infinitesimal" reflections filling the rounded drops, making the impossible possible.

Yet however close the poetic and the children's imaginations seem to be in this poem, the voice that speaks in it is informed by another way of seeing the world—an adult and intellectual way which opposes and compensates the childlike and instinctual one. It is implictly present in the twist given to the children's carefree ignorance:

> We were small and thought we knew nothing
> Worth knowing. . . .

While a child accepts the wheat and chaff of life—the man-made "scars" on the landscape along with the natural beauty—it is an adult view of the world which separates what is "worth knowing" from other forms of knowledge. And that adult sensibility comes to the fore in the final, isolated line, which brings to this light and lovely poem a note of gravity:

We could stream through the eye of a needle.

"Suffer little children . . . to come unto me: for such is the kingdom of God. . . . Whosoever shall not receive the kingdom of God as a little child shall in no wise enter therein." Christ's words hover about this poem, unstated but recalled by the New Testament reference in the final line to the parable of the rich young man, which follows on immediately from the blessing of the children (Matthew xix.14-26). In response to the young man's question, "what shall I do to inherit eternal life?", Jesus advises him to give his earthly possessions to the poor and follow him. On seeing the young man's "sorrowful" rejection of this advice, Jesus contrasts the rich with the children of whom he had just spoken: "How hardly shall they that have riches enter into the kingdom of God! For it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God". Like the rich young man, the poet envies the different wealth of the railway children, their imaginative capacity to reduce the poles to needles threaded with the wet lines; he wishes to be unburdened and to possess once more their rapt secret communion with realities of another order. But however marvellous the children's imaginative capacity is, there is another form of contact with reality that keeps the adult trapped in his own mind, and like the rich young man, Heaney is attached to his burden, to his own wealth as a man and as a poet. In one sense, he cannot relinquish all and stray, trusting implicitly, into the unknown, because of his adult perspective. Yet in venturing into the world of imagination and all but excluding these kinds of judgment, the poem actually catches something of the freedom it so admires.

II

One of the threads that runs through this volume, connecting poems within and between the different sections, is Heaney's heightened curiosity about the links between his writing, as a poet, and what is written into him by the world of which he is a part. (He returns to explore this question further in his next volume, *The Haw Lantern*.) The tracks and lines in "The Underground" and "The Railway Children" are means of communication and transmission. And when we look closely we notice that such lines criss-cross the poetry throughout *Station Island* as they criss-cross the earth. There are, for instance, the passages travelled by "lost words" in "The Loaning", with once again "high-tension cables/singing above cattle" in the same poem. There is the journey undertaken by Brigid and her family in "A Migration"; the path back along his life that absorbs the old man in "The Last Look"; a literal and metaphoric journey undertaken by Chekhov; the "dark morse/along the bank" in "The King of the Ditchbacks". And there are the mysterious ways of communicating in the animal world—the ancient flyways of birds, which man cannot discern; the echo-locating navigational system of bats, which uses frequencies far beyond the range of the human ear; the regular and restricted path travelled by creatures in the sea. The poetry is alive to the signs and signals throughout the natural world to which we humans have long ceased to attend and have thus lost much of our ability to interpret. "Stand still", urges the voice in "The Loaning",

> . . . You can hear
> everything going on. High-tension cables
> singing above cattle, tractors, barking dogs,
> juggernauts changing gear a mile away.
> And always the surface noise of the earth
> you didn't know you'd heard till a twig snapped
> and a blackbird's startled volubility
> stopped short.

*Station Island* entertains this idea in two ways: first, in a free, creative exploration of the relationship between human calligraphy, the very act of writing by hand, and the curves and lines that adorn the natural world "like lovely freehand"; and secondly, in the poems' preoccupation with the way writing shapes, as well as expresses, experience.

The railway children actually clamber over and through this landscape seen as calligraphy—climbing the "slopes" of the cutting, looking at the vertical lines cut by horizontals as they stand at "eye-level", the shape of the word imaging the sight before them. In "Away from it All" the wavy motion of the sea suggests writing in both senses of the word: ". . . the sea darkens/and whitens and darkens/and quotations start to rise", as if by association with the pattern the waves create. In the same poem the image of "oarsmen's backs and oars/hauled against and lifting" once again enacts the cursive movement of handwriting, a movement complemented by the rhythm of the lines. The "loop" of a snowshoe "is like a brushed longhand character" (p.24), and the string of "A Kite for Michael and Christopher" sags and ascends before "this line [of poetry, of exploration] goes useless". The women's "white buckets/like flashes on their ruffled wings" (p.36) suggest not only birds, but the rounded tips of feathers, a suggestion picked up again in the "Sweeney Redivivus" section. A human soul "plumes from the mouth/in undulant, tenor/black-letter latin" in "On the Road", and the description of "Holly" as a "black-letter bush" depends on the outlined shapes of its leaves as well as its being a source of ink. In the "sloped cursive of each back" in the scriptorium of "The First Gloss" is a living repetition of the Latin shapes that occupy the scribes; and the transgressive, independent "First Gloss . . . into the margin" is valued above obedient and submissive transcription, however beautifully done.

This seriously playful delight in writing being inscribed into the world is complemented by the poetry's continued probing of writing's power, and the poet's responsibilities to that power. While the earth buzzes with the communication of all living things, the human language is distinctive. Like "The Diviner" in his earliest volume of poetry, Heaney is drawn to the source within the earth, and his rod is language. In this volume he explores the ways in which his own marks on paper are like the pathways and marks on the land—signs to be read and interpreted, possible ways into and through the mystery of life, of identity, of poetry. But what these marks are signs of, or roads to, is not given: the poet must continually re-navigate in order to discover and rediscover routes and ways through these mysteries for himself.

The speaker in "Making Strange" talks of "my own country", and there is a sense in which Heaney's "own country" is changing, from the sweet and sour landscape of actual "sweetbriar" and "snowberries" to a terrain where such oppositions and contradictions exist as abstraction or ideas. His own country is well on the way to being a country of the mind, as he becomes a poet first, an Irishman second. He sees that he shares a passport with Milosz and Chekhov, and with Thomas Hardy, as well as with Joyce and Yeats. The practice of testing literary figures as possible conduits or means through which Heaney can forward his personal poetic exploration, familiar from *North* and *Field Work*, is extended in this volume, which presents the poet as to some extent like the shot "Widgeon" which allows a person to sound his own voice in a new way. That poem acknowledges that the tale it tells that has been told before, and that the new voicings are "small"; but the tale remains one of wonder and discovery:

he found, he says, the voice box
—like a flute stop
in the broken windpipe—

and blew upon it
unexpectedly
his own small widgeon cries.

Neil Corcoran is on the right track when he describes this poem as "an allegory of the book's procedure" (p.154). Throughout *Station Island* Heaney does indeed "return a voice to the dead", but he is more concerned (even in the "Station Island" sequence) with discovering how his own small vulnerabilities connect with nature than with trying to bring the dead back to life. The "unexpected" discovery in "Widgeon" is that by looking outwards, rather than into the self, the experimental musician produced his "own call/With a clean new music in it"—a sound which the poet has been trying to retrieve ever since "Personal Helicon" (*Death of a Naturalist*). In a number of other poems Heaney looks beyond his own experience for precedents and even authority ("quotations") that might help him raise such a voice again. One risk involved in such conscious awareness of one's processes is the loss of the spontaneous, "unexpected" discovery which the poet clearly prizes. Another is that the cost of loosening the bonds that bind him to his actual country may not be offset by the gains that the resulting detachment will bring to his poetry.

That Heaney feels the need to maintain his attachment and yet free himself of it is evident from the continued return to this predicament throughout the volume. In some poems he takes heart from the knowledge that other writers have been there before him. Thomas Hardy's art is admired not for its "invention" but for the way words are both "nourished" and "resisted" to produce a written world which seems as much a part of Hardy as the old man's country in "Last Look" is of him.

(Just as the old man grows out of his native place, so Hardy's writing grows out of his). The poem "The Birthplace" not only describes Hardy's literal birthplace; it finds evidence in Hardy's writing that it was also the birthplace of his creative soul; it was a real source of inspiration, so that Hardy had "no need to invent."

But how the life that he carried within him is actually transcribed to the page remains a mystery. There is an implication that a poem is almost a gift: the place breathes on the poet, elects him, and like music overpowers even a "reluctant heart". But there is also a reference to the poet's "single bed", to the part played by "discipline" in the act of poetic creation. Here we recognize both ways of "making . . . a music", earlier teased apart and ascribed to Wordsworth and Yeats, but now presented as complementary and entangled processes. And while many of Heaney's earlier poems focused on significant incidents, Wordsworthian "spots of time" which seemed for the poet "to set the darkness echoing", Part II of "The Birthplace" implies that even the most strongly-felt "episodes" of a life are not fully realized until the experience can be articulated into words. It is not enough for the darkness to echo, we need to know what it is saying. But what is Heaney's point, exactly: that experience needs language, or vice versa? Part III of this poem imagines words as random "weights" which have no function until they are "stacked" together to pin down experience. The poem moves around this now familiar mental landscape and comes back, at the end, to a valuing of specific detail. This exploration recollects the wonder and pleasure of a particular night, "thirty years ago", when the speaker

> . . . read until first light
>
> for the first time, to finish
> *The Return of the Native* . . .

What he then discovered, and sharply senses now, is how writing can close the conceptual gap between "art" and "life".

> The corncrake in the aftergrass
> verified himself, and I heard
> roosters and dogs, the very same
> as if he had written them.

Heaney wants, like Hardy, to eliminate the gap between abstract theory and concrete actuality—as he does in "Old Smoothing Iron", a poem which captures the rhythmic movement of a woman ironing:

> To work, her dumb lunge says,
> is to move a certain mass
>
> through a certain distance,
> is to pull your weight and feel
> exact and equal to it.
> Feel dragged upon. And buoyant.

There is a rhythmic echo here of the "oarsmen's back and oars/hauled against and lifting" (in "Away from it All"), as well as a shared thematic concern with people's responsibility to "pull [their] weight". Hardy serves as an example for the writer because he, like the woman ironing, feels "dragged upon. And buoyant", and he communicates this apparent contradiction in his own "work". Distinctions between how to write and how to live, which Heaney has previously explored, have no place here, for the qualities admired and valued in the writing are the same qualities admired in the life.

While it can help Heaney to see how other writers confronted difficulties similar to those that face him, his awareness of them as exemplars can give rise to new difficulties: rather than help him clarify his own position, it may muddy it even further. As Lionel Trilling explains in his study of "sincerity and authenticity",

> The individual . . . is subject to the constant influence, the literal *in-flowing* of the mental processes of others, which, in the degree that they stimulate or enlarge his consciousness make it more or less his own. He finds it ever more difficult to know what his own self is, and what being true consists in.[5]

This difficulty somewhat blurs Heaney's thinking about Chekhov in "Chekhov on Sakhalin". An end note to *Station Island* explains the incident upon which the poem is based:

> Chekhov's friends presented him with a bottle of cognac on the eve of his departure for the prison island of Sakhalin, where he spent the summer of 1890 interviewing all the criminals and political prisoners. His book on conditions in the penal colony was published in 1895.

In the poem the ring of the smashed bottle chimes with the ring of the convicts' chains, and "In the months to come/It rang on like the burden of his freedom". Chekhov's visit to the prison camp is presented as an act of obligation, an attempt to "squeeze/His slave's blood out" and to "waken the free man" in himself by confronting his personal history and by using the education which separates him from serfdom to benefit those still in chains.

Chekhov, with his serf's blood, "knew [the] worth" of his undertaking—as Heaney, too, knows it and therefore celebrates it in this poem. But his admiration for Chekhov's act serves to enlarge and embellish it, to transform him into a figure of religious standing in language whose "beauty" keeps the "atrocity" of the prison at a distance:

> . . . No cantor
> In full throat by the iconostasis
> Got holier joy than he got from that glass . . .

Heaney relishes his own voice "In full throat" here, savouring the sound and image of the "cantor . . . by the iconostasis" much as he imagines Chekhov savouring the cognac. And such self-relishing moves him to further excess, to compare the crystal glass of amber liquid to "diamonds

---

[5]Lionel Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity* (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1972), p.61.

warming/On some pert young cleavage in a salon,/Inviolable and affronting." This seems to me to be vesting the glass of cognac, not to mention the "pert young cleavage", with inflated significance.

However that may be, the intent is clearly to commend Chekhov's action as exemplary. As Heaney put it in an interview, by going to Sakhalin Chekhov was "temporarily entering the realm of service" and in doing so he "earned his brandy".[6] While the poem presents Chekhov as exceptional, it aligns Heaney more closely with "the Moscow literati", who came very close to "packing him off" to the penal colony with the gift of cognac:

> Should it have been an ulcer in the mouth,
> The cognac that the Moscow literati
> Packed off with him to a penal colony . . .

Why is Chekhov remembered if not for his *writing*? And as a writer he has been in "the realm of service" all along. His heroic summer at Sakhalin is raised above the rest of his life in this poem, distorted, in a sense, by Heaney's personal anxiety about failing the obligation "to pull [his] weight". The poet fuses his own "burden" with Chekhov's, and then defines their joint obligation, to "try for the right tone—not tract, not thesis", as a responsibility to language which overpowers any responsibility to make actual contact with the sufferers: "And walk away from the floggings." Douglas Dunn talks about how conscience "can be plaquey on the imagination",[7] and in this poem Heaney's imagination cannot clear itself of adherent and self-defeating anxieties. He sets out to commend Chekhov's heroism in acting beyond the limits of what writing can do,

---

[6]Conor Johnston, "Seamus Heaney, Sweeney, and *Station Island*," *Eire-Ireland*, 22, No. 2, 1987, 74.

[7]Douglas Dunn, "Heaney Agonistes," *London Magazine*, NS 24, No. 8 (1984), 95.

only to find his writing romanticizing, and thus limiting, that achievement.

A more immediate exemplar for Heaney than either Hardy or Chekhov is his countryman, Joyce, whose own work both explores and illustrates his ideas about the relationship between belonging and creativity. Joyce offers Heaney another possible route by which to sound and test his personal experience; indeed it is Joyce's shade who speaks the final words of advice in the pilgrimage sequence, and his presence is felt in the mood and imagery of *A Portrait of the Artist* which pervades *Station Island,* not least in the preoccupation with birds and flight. "A Bat on the Road" takes its epigraph from *A Portrait,* and also displays something of that novel's movement towards self-discovery. This poem, like so much of *Station Island,* engages with the value of freedom and flight and its relationship with attachment. The "bat on the road" is lured out of hiding to be inspected, but "this time" (it is an ongoing search) the way to understand it is not to "bring it down" and thus reduce or even degrade it, but to try to discover its value and distinctiveness in the shape and unfolding of its responses. Heaney's pursuit of the bat becomes, in the process of writing, the pursuit of a poem, "Follow[ing] its bat-flap", "swerving off" and "flying blind". As an image of freedom or of flight—in *Station Island* as well as in *Portrait*—birds are much more prominent than bats, but the bat-like swerves and returns are closer to Heaney's process of testing and exploring than "gliding for days without a single wingbeat", the metaphor he uses in another poem, "Drifting Off".

"A Bat on the Road" can stand alone as a mysterious and almost covert exploration of the desire to "Follow [the] bat-flap" in poetry while maintaining the detachment necessary to grasp and define the essence of

such flight; in other words, as a manifestation of "surrender" being resisted and given form by "control". But the epigraph makes it clear that Heaney is returning to the question of Irish identity which has been part of his poetry at least since "Bogland", and arguably since "Digging". The image of a "bat-like soul waking to the consciousness of itself in darkness and secrecy and loneliness" occurs twice in the last chapter of *A Portrait of the Artist* (pp.183 and 220), each time conveying the figure of Ireland as a woman. It first comes into Stephen's mind when Davin, "the young peasant [who] worshipped the sorrowful legend of Ireland" (p.180), tells the story of his encounter with a young woman late one night in an isolated cottage doorway:

> The last words of Davin's story sang in his memory and the figure of the woman in the story stood forth reflected in other figures of the peasant women whom he had seen standing in other doorways . . . as a type of her race and of his own, a bat-like soul waking to the consciousness of itself in darkness and secrecy and loneliness and, through the eyes and voice and gesture of a woman without guile, calling the stranger to her bed. (p.183)

The expression recurs when Stephen explores his entangled feelings towards his own "beloved", whom he had seen flirting with a young priest —"looking at him out of dove's eyes, toying with the pages of her Irish phrase-book":

> He had told himself bitterly as he walked through the streets that she was a figure of the womanhood of her country, a bat-like soul waking to the consciousness of itself in darkness and secrecy and loneliness, tarrying awhile, loveless and sinless, with her mild lover and leaving him to whisper of innocent transgressions in the latticed ear of a priest. (pp.220-21)

Each of these representations of the woman or soul of Ireland seems to stress her innocence; she is "sinless" and "without guile", but she is also "loveless" and without passion. Mysteriously seductive, she resembles both a virgin and a prostitute. While Heaney's poem pursues the bat as a metaphor for Ireland's soul, it does not interrogate it: like Joyce, he feels the pull of his country, whether in the guise of mother, mistress or maid, and

fears that any attempt to resist entanglement by her nets and webs merely allows her to "work" her "dark juices" further into his being, to "tighten her torc" on him as the earlier poem imagines Nerthus did on the Tollund Man. And in any case, Heaney also wants to become bat-like himself, to try to fly by the reference points of his landscape.

Being pulled in different directions is not a new experience for Heaney; what is new in this volume are the moments of lightness when such a pull is acknowledged without anxiety. In the poem "A Kite for Michael and Christopher" he describes how the kite he made for his sons seemed to change under his very eyes: from being "grey and slippy" it became "white and stiff", and once air-borne changed form as well as colour to become a "small black lark". Is the kite representative of the fact that nothing is absolutely knowable? Heaney tells his boys that they were "born fit for it": fit to feel the tugs and pull in different directions, to know that confusion and uncertainty are inextricably part of life, to be experienced first-hand, at once "a tightened drumhead, an armful of blown chaff." When he says "Stand here in front of me/and take the strain", he lightly acknowledges that in handing them their destiny to feel "the long-tailed pull of grief" (as everyone with the capacity for loving is bound to feel at some stage), he is also offering them something marvellous, the feel of the pull of the insubstantial on the heavy and earth-bound, the feel of being "dragged upon. And buoyant."

Not all the lyrics are as air-borne as this poem about the kite, or the one about the railway children. As we move closer to the central pilgrimage sequence, the pull of gravity becomes stronger, even something of a drag. But even in such a sombre poem as "The Loaning", the poet's preoccupations are familiar. He seems to be one with the speaker in this

poem, feeling a sense of belonging as he walks down the loaning—another passageway, a space between two fields. (The word "loaning" is a Middle English variant of "lane", which survives in Ireland and Scotland.) This is the country that "breathed" on him, and whose spirit he breathed in. It is the very birthplace of his gift, just as Hardy's first home, with its "unperturbed, reliable/ghost life" was the source of his inspiration.

If the loaning is the source of Heaney's inspiration, it is also "the limbo of lost words", the repository of those death-bed words which the speaker visualizes emerging from dying throats. It is not clear why they are lost—whether they are forgotten, or (more likely) whether they never reached their destination and now hover in a limbo somewhere between being uttered and being heard. And whose dying words are unheard? Those who die alone—the isolated, the forgotten, the murdered, and the suicides (buried at the cross-roads). Heaney's attention to the minute sounds and movement of the place no sooner catches something of the steady on-going rhythm of life than it becomes aware that this is not "everything"; it is "surface noise". Just as the rhythm of breathing remains smooth and regular only so long as it remains unconscious, so Heaney's attention shifts from a complete attention to the sounds as he becomes conscious of himself as listener:

> Stand still. You can hear
> everything going on. High-tension cables
> singing above cattle, tractors, barking dogs,
> juggernauts changing gear a mile away.
> And always the surface noise of the earth
> you didn't know you'd heard till a twig snapped
> and a blackbird's startled volubility
> stopped short.

The snapping of a twig stops short Heaney's as well as the blackbird's song. Indeed the poem suggests that this stopping short is as much a part of "the music of what happens" as is the continuous hum of "everything

going on". The snapping twig is a reminder of the danger and threat that are part of his countrymen's experience ("I . . . am startled/by the startled woodcock/or a blackbird's sudden/volubility" (*Sweeney Astray*, Section 40), and it snaps Heaney's imagination to another poem, another place, where pain is felt among the trees:

> When Dante snapped a twig in the bleeding wood
> a voice sighed out of blood that bubbled up
> like sap at the end of green sticks on a fire . . .

Dante's "bleeding wood" in the *Inferno* is a place full of human sounds, but with no signs of human life. It is the wood of the suicides (Canto XIII), the destination of those who snapped off their own lives. Tortured in life, they continue to be tortured in death: when Dante snapped the twig the voice cried "Why are you tearing me?" While the poem refers specifically to Dante, there is also an echo here of a voice closer to home, that of Yeats in "Cuchulain Comforted" (*Collected Poems*, p.395). Yeats's underworld is similar to Dante's wood: "Eyes stared out of the branches and were gone"; but it offers a consolation that Dante's does not. Cuchulain is "comforted" by the reassurance that "life can grow much sweeter" if all come together: " 'We thread the needles' eyes, and all we do/All must together do.' " If Cuchulain laid down his arms and joined the other shades in their sewing, he might also learn to sing as they did: "They sang, but had nor human tunes nor words/. . ./They had changed their throats and had the throats of birds".

But the "unquiet soul" in Dante's wood is offered no such peace of mind, no possibility of redemption; for him it is impossible to "thread the needles' eyes". Heaney realizes that the loaning, which inspires and comforts him, has infernal as well as paradisal aspects, and that to look towards being "comforted" involves turning away from the comfortless

realities which are part of the truth. To be aware of "everything going on" is to see that the "red" glow is not confined to the comforting sight of "pipes" in the kitchen, it also includes the terrifying sight of the interrogator's "blood-red cigarette" at the end of the poem. The "snap" of a twig can be as ominous as the "click of a cell lock", and any account of what is "going on" which denies that possibility is evasive. "When you are tired or terrified"—and therefore undiverted by such preoccupations as "artistic tact"—"your voice slips back into its old first place/and makes the sound your shades make there".

III

"The Loaning" suggests that "your shades" possess you just as much as you possess them, and in the central section of the volume, Heaney gives voice to twelve of his own shades, composes them into a jury "weighing and weighing" his failures and achievements, his guilt and his innocence. It is a form of self-torture, and the merciless "interrogator" who "steels his *introibo*" at the end of this poem could also be a description of Heaney himself, preparing to put himself under the scrutinizing spotlight of "Station Island".

Heaney has been much praised for this work, and it may be that it was necessary for him to "do his station" in this way. But to my mind "Station Island" relies rather heavily on the reader's assent to an idea of purgatorial pilgrimage that the poem does not question. My sense of the sequence is that it is somewhat bulky, and represents the poet grinding around issues which he is not on top of critically. The sequence also relies heavily on the myth of Sweeney, the crazed bird-man whose story Heaney translated as *Sweeney Astray*. In the introduction to his translation Heaney draws

explicit parallels between Sweeney and the "figure of the artist": each can be seen as "displaced, guilty, assuaging himself by his utterance."[8] "Station Island" seems to take those parallels as a given, rather than interrogate them. After the heightened self-consciousness of the poems in the first part of the volume, I find this section, where the speaker and the poet are of one voice, more problematic, presuming rather than arousing a keen interest in Sweeney-Heaney.

Part of the difficulty concerns the somewhat unconvincing link Heaney makes between the mad king of *Sweeney Astray* and the artist of "Station Island". Sweeney's poems, like Heaney's "Station Island" sequence, accept that the relationship between conduct and judgment is fixed. When Heaney puts his own behaviour under the "blaze" of the interrogator's light, all that is revealed is the face which reflects that glare: other ways of judging or valuing that behaviour are obscured in the shadow. So his encounters with his "shades" can serve as a way of defining and fixing his moral and poetic weaknesses and strengths, as well as a way of testing and exploring them.

Sweeney's banishment to the trees came about as a result of his response to the Christian cleric, Ronan. When he realized that Ronan was marking out a church on his land, Sweeney rushed at him in a rage. Sweeney was a man of action, "quick/to sense a chance and quick to strike" (Section 16); he did "crack the whip [and] seize the day", banishing the outraged cleric from his land. And in retaliation, Ronan put a curse on him, "He shall roam Ireland, mad and bare", giving that curse the seal of divine authority: "it is God's decree" (Section 6). The curse is soon fulfilled, when the warrior-king, once "the flower among them all" (Section 16), is confronted by such

---

[8]*Sweeney Astray* (London: Faber & Faber, 1983) unnumbered second and third pages.

horror on the battlefield that he is suddenly forced to flee from the carnage and adopt another mode of existence. "How perilous is it to choose/Not to love the life we're shown?" Heaney wondered in "The Badgers". But to what extent can people be said to "choose" to embrace or reject the life they lead?

It is clear from the start that Sweeney is still a man, but the delusion that he is confined to the trees is very dear to him, and even the persuasions of his wife and his kinsmen cannot move him from the "path he [is] set upon". He believes he has to live a life of deprivation, "ranging like a mad pilgrim", not allowed any rest (Section 43). That he accepts and even embraces Ronan's curse is quite plain; the episode in which the mill-hag can match him leap for leap indicates how his "flight" is not so much that of a bird as that of a man who believes he is a bird (Section 39). So entrenched does this obsession become that he eventually grows feathers.

Sweeney's hunger for punishment (emphasized by his constant lack of actual nourishment) consumes his bodily self until he is purified and becomes a "saint". But how dreadful was his banishment of Ronan to deserve the deprivation that Sweeney suffered? The only answer is, as dreadful as he believed it to be. When he threw the spear at Ronan and "profaned [his] bell's holiness" (the Cleric's words), Sweeney acted according to his own nature: he was angry, and anger may be a weakness, a sin; but who is without weakness? Sweeney, however, cannot accept this frailty in himself, and enters into his punishment so whole-heartedly that it dominates him; and it is this obsession that makes him mad. The change from celebrated king to deprived bird-man is extreme, and it mirrors the swing from a spirited and "bold" lashing-out at Christianity to a stark penitence: in the moment of Ronan's curse, Sweeney is also struck by the

power of God. When the stag's "bell" (rather than the cleric's) "makes the whole glen shake/and re-echo" so that "unearthly sweetness shakes [his own] breast", Sweeney calls on God in order to suppress any earthly desires:

> O Christ, the loving and the sinless,
> hear my prayer, attend, O Christ,
> and let nothing separate us.
> (Section 23)

In "Station Island" Heaney too believes it is necessary to deprive himself of all luxury, including the consolations of language's beauty and the comfort of self-acceptance. Just as Sweeney feels compelled to move from tree to tree, Heaney keeps his mind on the move, allowing himself no rest.

"Station Island" presents him confronted by a series of shades. Some, like Heaney, are writers or teachers; others are victims of violence—and in every case it can be seen in retrospect that they did "participate actively in history." They include a hunger-striking "internee", a "fork-tongued turncoat" "informer" and an "emigré" missionary. These shades evaluate Heaney's achievement (and, by implication, their own). They suggest ways in which he might avoid their circuits of regret. Since their words of criticism are in fact Heaney's own, it becomes self-criticism. This raises important questions: is Heaney, by writing this criticism into his work, establishing an "alibi", providing himself with a defence against such criticism in the mouths of others? Or does this sequence explore a genuine anguish about how this concern with the moral and aesthetic worth of his poetry can exert a tyrannical power over it? The sequence is marked by contrasts between the soft mist and the clear light, between doubts and certainties, between the pilgrim's circular returnings and the clearly-drawn lines of his visitants, but it is difficult to ascertain whether these contrasts are presented in a fruitful debate, or merely reflect the poet's confusion.

As his pilgrimage is about to begin, the poet comes upon the shade of another Sweeney, the tinker whose instinctual way of life—so close to the natural world that he was almost invisible—excited and called to the young Heaney. The shade tauntingly reminds him of this excitement:

> . . . when
>
> woodsmoke sharpened air
> or ditches rustled
> you sensed my trail there
> as if it had been sprayed . . .

But, like Dante in the bleeding wood, sensing human presence but unable to see any reassuring evidence of it, Heaney is "half-afraid" of the tinker's life beyond the constraints of social and religious convention. And the shade's advice, which opens a path of freedom for the poet—"Stay clear of all processions"—is resisted by a more powerful attraction: Heaney follows instead the path taken by the "shawled women . . . wading the young corn,/their skirts brushing softly". Even though "Their motion saddened morning", the "murmur of the crowd" called to him more powerfully than Sweeney's "shout", and

> opened a drugged path
>
> I was set upon.

This can be read to mean that he had no choice but to follow the "shawled women": that the course of this self-examination was, like the course of his life, pre-determined. But there is also a sense in which he seems to have his mind "set upon" re-entering that "drugged path", that he has resolved to "face" the elements in his life which narcotically induced him "To sleepwalk with connivance and mistrust", as he puts it in Section IX.

While he understands frailty in others, he cannot forgive it in himself. And he cannot allow the ghosts of his past to forgive him either. For example, when he meets the shade of the friend whose heartbeats on the

hospital screen "scared [him] the way they stripped things naked" (Section VIII), he presents himself pleading for forgiveness for having "failed an obligation" when he could not find any words to comfort his dying friend:

> Did our long gaze and last handshake contain
> nothing to appease that recognition?

His friend's response, in turn, offers no comfort to the poet: "Nothing at all". This exchange is an example of how, throughout the sequence, Heaney does not merely accept his own "guilty" verdict but welcomes and even courts it. This acquiescence seems to me somewhat tiresome and inert, especially when it is repeated in so many other "stations".

There are no words to answer the question the shade puts to the "lucky poet": "tell me why/what seemed deserved and promised passed me by?" In this dream encounter, as in life, Heaney "could not speak". But what words might he have uttered to his dying friend that could possibly have left him feeling that he had risen to the occasion? The only comfort Heaney can find is in voicing his accusation—the kind of comfort he ascribes to Sweeney "assuaging himself by his utterance." Heaney starts to explain: "Those dreamy stars that pulsed across the screen/beside you in the ward", but breaks off to correct himself of this (self-diagnosed) "artistic tact": "—your heartbeats, Tom, I mean—", and this brings him to a moment of self-discovery. The way a man's life could be reduced to flashing lights on a monitor "scared [him] the way they stripped things naked", he confesses; it dried up his "banter" and exerted a mesmerizing force over him, so that he "could not take [his] eyes off the machine." His involuntary way of writing—his love of the texture of language, his senses quickened by the mysterious and unknowable and strange—is at odds with any mechanical or reductive method or technique. But he fears that art can be a hiding place; now, in "Station Island", he wants to strip his poetry of

any evasiveness, and undergo a more thorough exposure than he has done so far. But he is also "scared" at the prospect of stripping himself so naked.

In Section II, William Carleton's shade advises him to be realistic and politically shrewd:

> . . . you have to try to make sense of what comes.
> Remember everything and keep your head.

The poet responds by misreading the advice as a licensing of what he finds natural and congenial to him. He turns back to the objects of his childhood delight; the focus is on nouns, rather than on any activity, as if the mere savouring of sensations were its own justification. Memory must be selective, for to "Remember everything" would mean that no moment could stand out sharply: every experience would be invested with the same value, with the result that beauty, richness and strangeness would blur into indeterminate shapelessness. And the pilgrim makes a selection:

> 'The alders in the hedge,' I said, 'mushrooms,
> dark-clumped grass where cows or horses dunged,
> the cluck when pith-lined chestnut shells split open
>
> in your hand, the melt of shells corrupting,
> old jampots in a drain clogged up with mud—'

But he then allows the shade to cut into this catalogue of memories with the rebuke that "all this" is "another life", and to castigate him for choosing to evade the realities of "our element". Heaney, who wants the beauty and consolation of the natural world, is also consumed by a need to be punished for this inclination. Throughout "Station Island" his mood resembles that of Yeats in another poem, "Parnell's Funeral":

> Come, fix upon me that accusing eye.
> I thirst for accusation. . . .
> (*Collected Poems*, p. 319)

While the shades are all given words to accuse Heaney, he makes no accusations against others, responding with compassion and

understanding to what could be judged to be weakness or guilt surpassing his own: the "turncoat" Carleton's opportunism is understood as a flexibility that was necessary for him, while at the other end of the spectrum, the commitment of a revolutionary "hit man", as inflexible in his death by hunger as he was in life, is also accommodated (Section IX). It is only his own limitations that the poet cannot view with kindness, his own spirit that cannot be allowed any comfort.

Take the most poignant and pointed visitation: that of his second cousin, subject of the elegy in *Field Work*, "The Strand at Lough Beg". Heaney presents himself as not even recognizing the shade at first:

> 'The red-hot pokers blazed a lovely red
> in Jerpoint the Sunday I was murdered,'
> he said quietly. 'Now do you remember?'
> (Section VIII)

Flowers, like the cigarette in "The Loaning", can suggest torture, in this case not the torture of the "bleeding, pale-faced boy", but of Heaney himself. He "pleads", but does not argue, with the shade, who values the other poets' "agitation at the news" of his death above Heaney's "contemplation of a motionless point":

> I kept seeing a grey stretch of Lough Beg
> and the strand empty at daybreak.

The shade rejects that "alibi", and rejects the tolerant acceptance of their family's ways in the earlier elegy: "You and yours and yours and mine fought shy,/. . . And could not crack the whip or seize the day". In retrospect, Heaney believes that he should have cracked the whip, and at the very least caught the sound of that crack in his elegy; he should have seized the opportunity for outraged action. In the face of that belief he can only offer a contrary one: "I felt like the bottom of a dried up lake"—unable to produce anything, the source of his powers gone. John Bayley makes the

point that the self-consciousness of modern poets is particularly crippling when they come to write an elegy: they are "aware that what [they] say about [the dead] only recognizes extinction by drawing attention to [their] own survival".[9] This awareness may be why the shade is allowed to press on remorselessly: "You saw that, and you wrote that—not the fact." But what is at issue here is not one "fact", as somewhere Heaney realizes. Is not his immediate response to his cousin's death, that visualization of his absence, equally a "fact" to be considered? Through the shade, Heaney accuses himself, but even in the scorching accusation he allows himself an escape adverb, "perhaps":

> You confused evasion and artistic tact.
> The Protestant who shot me through the head
> I accuse directly, but indirectly, you
> who now atone perhaps upon this bed
> for the way you whitewashed ugliness and drew
> the lovely blinds of the *Purgatorio*
> and saccharined my death with morning dew.

These words are their own "pouches" of meaning: once Heaney's attention turns outward to imagine another person speaking, he is freed to speak in his own poetic voice. Here, the very lines which accuse also manifest the beautifying cast of mind he is accusing himself of: "drew/the lovely blinds of the *Purgatorio* . . .".

Whereas earlier Heaney had envied the Tollund Man "something of his sad freedom" because his victim-status put him beyond guilt, now he makes a victim of himself. But like the hunger-striking "hit-man" he describes in Section IX as if he were part human, part animal ("Often I was dogs on my own track/Of blood on wet grass that I could have licked"), Heaney too is "light-headed" as he takes aim at himself in this sequence. A nightmare of "self-disgust" is followed by this outburst:

---

[9]"Living In and Living Out: The Poet's Location for the Poetry," *Agenda*, 27, No. 1 (1989), 32.

> 'I hate how quick I was to know my place.
> I hate where I was born, hate everything
> That made me biddable and unforthcoming,'
> I mouthed at my half-composed face
> In the shaving mirror, like somebody
> Drunk in the bathroom during a party,
> Lulled and repelled by his own reflection.

Beneath the humour Heaney understands that he must first be "Lulled . . . by his own reflection" in order to enter into a state where he can transcend his feelings of inadequacy as a man and as a poet, and write poetry. He also realizes that the core of his own nature cannot be changed, however much pressure is put upon it, and that the circular "eddy[ing]" in which he is engaged in "Station Island" can only be part of his total achievement: it cannot "reform" it. The cairnstone cannot "defy the cairn" or "the eddy. . . reform the pool", any more than "a stone swirled under a cascade,/Eroded and eroding in its bed,/could grind itself down to a different core." These lines at the end of Section VIII indicate a degree of sane self-acceptance, and suggest that all this turning and returning is actually taking him somewhere.

Indeed in parts of the sequence his poetry exhibits the kind of bare strength which he spends so much time wishing for. An example is Section VII, where the appearance of the shade so rocks the poet that his attention is diverted from his own pain and he becomes absorbed in the process of creating and recounting a version of his friend's last moments. The detail is so engrossing that the ironies are well hidden: how the friend put on "a sportscoat" in which to meet his murderers; how "the quiet/hit [him] worse" than the knocking, and

> . . . I remember the stale smell
>
> of cooked meat or something coming through
> as I went to open up. . . .

The tale is told as if, from the moment the knocking began, the shopkeeper and his wife were "encountering what was destined."

> She started to cry then and roll round the bed,
> lamenting and lamenting to herself,
> not even asking who it was. "Is your head
>
> astray, or what's come over you?" I roared, more
> to bring myself to my senses
> than out of any real anger at her
>
> for the knocking shook me . . .

The man is imagined speaking in a way which explains how he felt, without any need to justify himself, or to crave understanding—he simply concentrates on filling in the details of the story. This is closer to "reporting fairly" than any self-conscious explaining, for here the details, and the imagining of the details, speak for themselves.

When Heaney's own voice breaks into the narrative, it enters firing questions like bullets, because he feels at once like victim and murderer: "Did they say nothing?" "Were they in uniform? Not masked in any way?" But the dead man, unlike Heaney, shows no equivocation, no crippling anxiety about "keeping his head" and finding words to represent every side. He denounces their "barefaced" arrogance completely, making no gestures towards understanding their extenuating circumstances: "shites thinking they were the be-all and end-all" (which of course, as far as his life went, they were). While Heaney can find this plain way of talking for his shade, he cannot adopt it as his own voice. We see this more clearly when we compare these lines spoken in the voice of the dead footballer with the way Heaney in his own voice addresses the "hit-man" of Section IX—a man who could have been the footballer's killer:

> Unquiet soul, they should have buried you
> In the bog where you threw your first grenade,
> Where only helicopters and curlews
> Make their maimed music, and sphagnum moss
> Could teach you its medicinal repose . . .

In Heaney's imaginative sympathy for this "unquiet soul" he almost goes so far as to metamorphose him into another bog-person, a victim; he has the shade describes the process of his hunger-strike in words that liken him to the Grauballe man, for instance:

> My brain dried like spread turf, my stomach
> Shrank to a cinder and tightened and cracked.

Yet even while Heaney himself cannot accept a clear-cut distinction between "shites" and "decent" people, he recognizes in the shopkeeper's "open-faced" honesty an absence of duplicity that he must admire. The "cleanliness shining off him" assumes a metaphoric state: the shopkeeper was a good man, and therefore "the perfect, clean, unthinkable victim." It is as if the very uttering of the word "victim" swings the poet's attention back towards himself:

> 'Forgive the way I have lived indifferent—
> forgive my timid circumspect involvement' . . .

The word "indifferent" repeats the judgement made by the woman in "An Afterwards" (*Field Work*), and it is no more apposite here than it was in that poem. Heaney's poetry shows him to be different from his dead friend, but not "indifferent", either in the sense of attaching no importance to the political realities of life in Ireland, or in the sense of adopting a coolly neutral stance "somewhere in between" opposing sides. To some extent he is a victim of his own anxiety that he is neither "perfect" nor a "shite". But what is so damnable about being "circumspect", which literally means seeing all around an issue, capable of taking more than a single perspective into account? Heaney is certainly troubled by these questions, but "timid" is

hardly the right word to describe his worried probing of them in "Station Island". He understands that to the straightforward mind of the footballer his own obsessive "involvement" in self-recrimination is futile; and indeed, it loses the poet his vision, which "trembled like a heatwave and faded." But he continues to "do his station", as if impelled by a force stronger than his own mind. It remains unclear to the reader, however, exactly how Heaney's poetry may be improved or strengthened through participation in this imaginative pilgrimage.

The footballer's story is simple and direct, heart-felt and moving. In telling it, Heaney achieves the bareness and boldness he seeks. And even in the shade's refusal to grant him absolution (" 'Forgive/my eye,' he said, 'all that's above my head' "), the poet shows that he understands that he must absolve himself. If he is to "strike [his] note", he must stop "raking at dead fires", as James Joyce's shade advises him in Section XII. But in some ways, raking over dead (or presumed-dead) fires is an essential part of Heaney's "note". His poetry is more inclined to "remember everything", with all the entangled difficulties and even impossibility that process involves, than to be, like the footballer, "forgetful of everything . . . except" the immediate subject. But that remembering, that patiently and persistently circling the same terrain is not a fruitless exercise if the poet believes it will provide a way into poetry.

> Then I thought of the tribe whose dances never fail
> For they keep dancing till they sight the deer.
> (Section IX)

These lines go to the heart of Heaney's poetic process in *Station Island*. For him the principle of the poem or the "dance" is the same. He feels he must "keep dancing till [he] sight[s] the deer": that if he is to capture the vision he seeks he must first "do his station". But on the whole, this sequence

seems to me less openly experimental that his venture in *North*, for example, and—like the tribe who do not allow for the possibility of the deer not appearing at all—the poet seems rather doggedly bent on turning his past failings into new sightings, successful poems.

IV

The poetry in *Station Island* keeps coming up against the same dilemma. If Heaney cannot do away with the checks and guards inherent in self-scrutiny, how can he obey Joyce's injunction to "Let go, let fly [and] forget" himself enough to simply capture his experience (and let the moral qualities fall where they may)? In the third section, "Sweeney Redivivus", he attempts to do just that by adopting a dramatic voice. Heaney's end-note explains that these poems are "voiced for Sweeney", and the title "Sweeney Redivivus" is usually interpreted to mean "Sweeney revived or resurrected" (Tamplin, p. 91), that in these poems Sweeney lives again. But Heaney has in mind, I believe, the other meaning of the word "redivivus", of old materials used again.[10] These poems are really "Sweeney recycled", as though through him Heaney hopes to achieve imaginative flight. The end-note adds that the poet "trust[s] that they can stand without the support system of the original story". Like the others, the poems in this section are mixed. Some do shine out, reaching beyond the limits of the Sweeney/Heaney parallel, but others depend for their success on a deeper involvement with the Sweeney myth than Heaney might reasonably expect from the reader. He empathizes with Sweeney the bird-man's feelings of alienation and deprivation, and with the way he tells the names

---

[10] "**redi-vivus**...**I.** *That lives again.* **II.** *Renovated, renewed,* of old materials used as new." Lewis, Charlton T. and Charles Short, *A Latin Dictionary: Founded on Andrews' Edition of* Freund's Latin Dictionary. (Oxford: Clarendon, first impression 1879, 1975 edition.)

of his resting places or describes the trees as if he were saying his prayers. But he also identifies with Sweeney the tinker, haunter of the ditchbacks, who "lives in his feet/and ears, weather-eyed,/all pad and listening,/a denless mover."

We see this in "The King of the Ditchbacks", when we ask ourselves who is the "king" of the title. Is it the tinker Sweeney who opens "a dark morse/along the bank"? Or the equally restless, elusive Sweeney of the second section, the bird-man of *Sweeney Astray*? (Both are Heaney's "mystery men", drawing him into their trail, seeming to embody the spirit of the place.) Is it not the poet himself who is "king"? He describes how, when he lay on the bed of the earth, he entered the experience of both Sweeneys: he was sheltered like the bird-man by the "deciduous canopy", and like the tinker by the "screened wain", the upturned cart, "of evening". There he lay "in silence", like a cunning, predatory lover, waiting for the guileless birds to return home to roost, so that he could shoot them down, and prove the mastery or kingship of man over the rest of the natural world, even over creatures of the air. And in Section III he describes his "sense of election" when he was crowned in a head-dress of twigs. Yet as he lay "among briars and stones" he discovered that this notion of kingship was alien to him; that he felt cut off from the men who were sorry that "No birds came", and who tried to entice him into their number:

> 'Come back to us,' they said, 'in harvest,
>
> when we hide in the stooked corn,
> when the gundogs can hardly retrieve
>
> what's brought down.' . . .

The poem shows him hiding among the corn-stooks, but also "taking protective colouring" from the men. In choosing a "migrant solitude" he escapes from the rituals these men feel they have to perform, the regalia

they have to wear ("top-knotted" like a woman), to prove themselves king of the world. He escapes into himself to become an "inner émigré", ruler of the independent state where he is the only subject.

So it would seem that the absorption of the two Sweeneys is offered as the poet's salvation, his way forward. But to stop here is to stop too soon, to ignore the reappearance of the biblical "rich young man" at the end of the poem. We recall that the rich young man was given an answer to his questions by Christ. Salvation was possible, if he gave up everything: not just his material wealth, but everything he held onto and that held him—including his search, and even his consciousness. To surrender all would be to "lose himself", which is what Heaney, too, wants: to "let go, let fly, forget". In "King of the Ditchbacks" Heaney sees himself momentarily as the rich young man, on the rim of discovery and true kingship.

> . . . And I saw myself
> rising to move in that dissimulation,
>
> top-knotted, masked in sheaves, noting
> the fall of birds: a rich young man
>
> leaving everything he had
> for a migrant solitude.

But in that momentary identification he sees too that it is not other people he is deceiving: the victim of his "dissimulation" is himself. For him, as for the rich young man, the answer to his question does not resolve his difficulty: it just re-presents his difficulty to him in a different way. He cannot surrender everything, for he "is mired in attachment", part of his dependence is on Sweeney ("He was depending on me as I hung out on the limb of a translated phrase. . . . Small dreamself in the branches.") and part is on the "co-ordinates", the trappings, of his own life.

The "Sweeney Redivivus" section shows how the pull of the two Sweeneys traps the poet, rather than frees him. Heaney's attempts to merge

their experiences with his own in order to construct a new poetic voice give rise to the same sort of problems he encountered in the "Station Island" sequence: it is impossible to be other than you are, to assume an identity outside your own. In one poem, "Alerted", the speaker hears "the bark of the vixen in heat", and feels the call of the wild. The sound seems to enter deep into his being, and to simply untangle the complex "webs of desire" and knots of anxiety that have been repressed or "whacked down" in him:

> She carded the webs of desire,
> she disinterred gutlines and lightning,
> she broke the ice of demure
> and exemplary stars . . .

In unearthing a power that had been buried, in bringing electricity flashing up in him, the vixen's cry reminds him that he is not an isolated being but is connected by his very "gutlines" to the rest of the cosmos. His frozen self-restraint is cracked, as he realizes that the stars by which mankind steers a course are not fixed and frozen, but flashing and moving: the whole world is alive with energy—quite literally, he feels the earth move. But in that instant of discovery he recognizes the irony that he is "rooted . . . to the spot" by, and in, his awareness that he is separate from the cosmic movement of which he is a part. And what the bark of the vixen unburies is buried again by his sudden knowledge of it, leaving him

> . . . disappointed
> under my old clandestine
> pre-Copernican night.

While he knows that the earth is not the still centre of the universe—knows this not simply through scientific discovery but through his own immediate experience—this knowledge is resisted by a furtive, almost primitive belief to the contrary.

In what way could this poem be said to be "voiced for Sweeney"? It does not dramatize the bird-king's experience: he was a man of action, not given to the stumbling anxiety of "asking [him]self could [he] ever/and if ever [he] should/outstrip obedience". He did not recognize obedience to anything beyond himself; that was what he had to learn. Nor can the "I" of this poem be Sweeney the tinker, who was intimate with the vixen's bark, and whose "gutlines" were not "interred". Like the vixen, the tinker regarded civilized ("rooted . . . to the spot") man as his natural enemy, and like the mad king, he kept on the move. It is Heaney, the self-conscious poet, who speaks in "Alerted", and indeed throughout the "Sweeney Redivivus" section.

The "Hermit" in the poem of that name is not ranging, but has dug himself into a space which he can make secure from outside demands. Yet the poem begins with him "prowl[ing] the rim of his clearing", his attention still on the jungle that he has left behind. The description of him, "like a ploughshare", is a reminder of the farming community in which he has no "share": the hermit has not "spared [himself]/one stump of affection". But like Heaney, and like Sweeney, he cannot "get away from it all", because he cannot cut off the demands he makes on himself. In restraining himself he is prevented from moving beyond that cleared space and is denied the opportunity to strengthen his "wrists and elbows" through the struggle against life's adversities. Yet the poem suggests that the strain he has created has become his particular adversity, "the bitted/and high-drawn sideways curve/of the horse's neck": that as well as being like the "ploughshare", he is like the horse that pulls it. Either side of the "clearing", it is the experience of being "stretched" between "the pull/ and the drive" that reinvigorates the mind:

> the more brutal the pull
> and the drive, the deeper
> and quieter the work of refreshment.

The hermit's clearing is like the space the poet clears in the act of writing, when he "steps" into "the margin"—literally, "the edge of the possible". The harder it is to take that step, the greater the reward. The discovery of the scribe in "The First Gloss", who can "outstrip obedience" and step beyond the limits circumscribed for him might resemble, writes Heaney,

> early Irish glosses, those brief rhapsodies of the scribe in the margin as he breaks free from the illumination of the great Latin of Holy Writ into the intimate vernacular of the Old Irish language. Often these verses catch a glimpse of a creature—a blackbird or a seal or a cat—or of a joyful moment in the wood. The radiance of a God-filled and divinely ordained nature is implicit in each little pleasure spurt from the hermit's pen.[11]

In these lines Heaney could be describing some of his own best poetry, such as "Holly", a poem which recalls "a joyful moment in the wood", gathering holly, when the unpredictable reality proved more satisfying than the expectation: "It rained when it should have snowed" and

> There should have been berries
>
> but the sprigs we brought into the house
> gleamed like smashed bottle-glass.

There was something real and dangerous about the blood the children gave in order to create this imperfect, glittering prize. There is an illicit joy about the "smash[ing]" of "bottle-glass" which takes the children, like hooligans, just beyond "the rim of [their] clearing". The power of memory gives the sharp edge to that early experience, as in the first poem in the volume, "The Underground", where the poet returns "as Hansel . . . lifting the buttons". "Now", the sight of "a room . . . decked/with the red-berried, waxy-leafed stuff" reminds him of what he has lost.

---

[11] *The Place of Writing* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989), p.59.

> . . . I almost forget what it's like
> to be wet to the skin or longing for snow.

As a poet he knows that to bring things to life he has to push against the temptation to accept the substitute "red-berried, waxy-leafed stuff" as real. He knows the difference, but "doubts" his capacity to be sufficiently open to allow himself to be illuminated:

> I reach for a book like a doubter
> and want it to flare round my hand,
>
> a black-letter bush, a glittering shield-wall
> cutting as holly and ice.

Heaney wants the book to be to him what the holly once was but he fears that it will resemble the tame, "waxy-leaved stuff". He wants the rewards that pain and loss and deprivation will bring, and trusts that, through this exposure, the "holly" will "flare" into "a black-letter bush".

now
all space
swells like an ocean

a hurricane beats
on the black sail

the wing of a blizzard circles
over the black square

and the island sinks
beneath the salty increase

now you have
empty space
more beautiful than the object

more beautiful than the place it leaves
it is the pre-world
a white paradise
of all possibilities
you may enter there
cry out
vertical-horizontal

perpendicular lightning
strikes the naked horizon

we can stop at that
anyway you have already created a world

Zbigniew Herbert
"Study of the Object"

## *CHAPTER SIX*

### Lightening the Scales:
### *The Haw Lantern* (1987)

Rather than circling despondently around the old worries about public and private responsibilities as he does in much of *Station Island,* in *The Haw Lantern* Heaney is at once more poised and more relaxed: he waits, and watches, and often at the right moment, strikes. The centre of the book is occupied by a sequence of poems in memory of the poet's mother, "Clearances", and the dedicatory poem (p.24) suggests the nature of Heaney's poetic discovery in this volume.

> *She taught me what her uncle once taught her:*
> *How easily the biggest coal block split*
> *If you got the grain and hammer angled right.*
>
> *The sound of that relaxed alluring blow,*
> *Its co-opted and obliterated echo,*
> *Taught me to hit, taught me to loosen,*
>
> *Taught me between the hammer and the block*
> *To face the music. Teach me now to listen,*
> *To strike it rich behind the linear black.*

This poem is dedicated to Heaney's realization that as something ends (the mass is split), something else begins; the perfect delivery of the hammer blow becomes the source of new possibilities. The pleasure of getting "the grain and hammer angled right" is that the subsequent blow feels so satisfying—at once simple and perfect, complete in itself. It is a pleasure which readers of Heaney's poetry experience again and again. Presented with a poem which strikes in precisely the right spot with precisely the right force, a poem which seems to go simply and naturally to the heart of things, readers often find it difficult to account for their admiration. As in most cases where someone hits the nail on the head, a

common response is that there is nothing left to be said. But there is always something to be said. In this case, for instance, the "blow" of his mother's death, going directly to the grain of the poet's being, provides him with a way of exploring the meaning and value of their relationship.

Heaney's poetry in *The Haw Lantern* offers his reader a similar challenge: to find the "grain", to hit upon a seam in what appears to be an impenetrable whole. In other words, the reader is "co-opted" to respond to the poetry in the same way as Heaney responds to the hammer-blow. Opening up the vein requires "relaxed" surrender to the "allure" of the sounds and echoes of the poetry, and careful attention to the sometimes contradictory impulses of the language. But this willingness "to listen" must be accompanied by a readiness to pursue an insight behind the lines of the work. To "face the music" in Heaney's terms, then, is at once to yield to its power and to meet the responsibility to shape and define what is discovered in that yielding.

The final lines of "Holly" (*Station Island*, p.115) give us a picture of a poet who fears that in substituting the symbol for the natural object he risks losing all that was real to him in life. In one way Heaney's education has widened his understanding, but in another it seems to have taken him away from the sharp edge of his experience. He continues to test this self-doubt in *The Haw Lantern*, and in the process he finds a way of loosening the grip of these doubts and self-accusations. As he examines the way his life interconnects with the lives of others, he tries to come to terms with the fact that the act of substituting a symbol for the actual always involves some "genuinely well-/adjusted adequate betrayal/Of what [he] knew better" ("Clearances", p.28); that in one way the experience is real and in another its significance can only be grasped at one remove.

I

The volume opens with two poems, "Alphabets" and "Terminus", which look back over the poet's life and try to make sense of it, in two different ways—as a gradually widening and cumulative experience, and secondly as a crystallized understanding. The first poem, "Alphabets", charts Heaney's development from child to adult, presenting him absorbing alphabets, acquiring new ways of interpreting the world and finding his vocation: "The poet's dream stole over him like sunlight/And passed into the tenebrous thickets." Now, in hindsight, it seems to him that even before he went to school he could sense that a sign or a symbol, the shadow picture of the rabbit on the wall, could convey something true to his own and his father's experience. He describes how, along with the smell of inkwells at school, he inhales "in the classroom hush" a reverence for language and learning, and how, as his education proceeds, he breathes in new alphabets, new ways of making sense of or translating experience: how for him, Latin "Declensions sang on air like a *hosanna*", entering and lifting his heart like a benediction. He "bends" and "reaches" lovingly to plant and reap the intellectual fruit, to harvest the literary "bales" and "stooked sheaves" which connect his work with that of his forefathers.

But that resemblance is his own intellectual creation: it is "a team of quills [he drives] on his white field", taking him far away from the "rafters and a cross-tie", the "little leaning hoe", the "swan's neck and swan's back" and the "forked stick that they call a Y" of his first world. The further he "drives" himself in search of "the figure of the universe" and " 'not just single things' ", the more difficult it becomes to recover his "wide pre-reflective stare". Examining the idea that his life has been

shaped by his gradual mastery of the written word, he discovers both how far that mastery has taken him from his origins, and how minimal that distance is. "The globe has spun", and the changes he registers are internal as well as external. Where once he interpreted symbols by relating them to the physical world (in the unfamiliar Y he saw the "forked stick" he had known from infancy, for example), now he interprets the signs on the physical world in terms familiar from the place of books and writing which he now inhabits. Even his memories are transformed in this way:

> Time has bulldozed the school and school window.
> Balers drop bales like printouts where stooked sheaves
>
> Made lambdas on the stubble once at harvest
> And the delta face of each potato pit
> Was patted straight and moulded against frost.

When he looks "from his small window" of books or study, he shares the view of the "astronaut" who

> . . . sees all he has sprung from,
> The risen, aqueous, singular, lucent O
> Like a magnified and buoyant ovum–

"All he has sprung from" is still a fertile source, full of potential, but it is somehow beyond him. On the one hand, the poet cannot recapture the wide pre-reflective wonder he had as a boy, but on the other, his extensive education in symbol and sign has brought him back in a circle. He seeks through language the key to a world whole and complete, and discovers that with all his learning he is still like the boy who stood

> All agog at the plasterer on his ladder
> Skimming our gable and writing our name there
> With his trowel point, letter by strange letter.

And yet he is not that little boy any more; what now has him "All agog" is the idea that his continuous attempts to widen the horizons of his understanding so that he might "see life steadily and see it whole" have, in a sense, taken him nowhere. He is still without the "diamond

absolutes", the "crystal and kept" certainties that he longs for even while he knows they themselves are an illusion.

The following poem, "Terminus", reflects on his life in a different way, but reaches no more satisfying conclusion. In this poem, Heaney puts his own old formulation, "I grew up in between", to the test: how true, how adequate, is that way of perceiving his past or his identity? Formally, the poem is carefully, even rigidly, patterned:

> When I hoked there, I would find
> An acorn and a rusted bolt.
>
> If I lifted my eyes, a factory chimney
> And a dormant mountain.
>
> If I listened, an engine shunting
> And a trotting horse.
>
> Is it any wonder when I thought
> I would have second thoughts?

Here the traditions of British Protestant industrialism and Irish Catholic agrarianism are set up in a familiar opposition. Any resemblances or more complex relationships are squeezed out of the picture (as if the appearance of an acorn had nothing in common with that of a rusted bolt, or the rhythm of a shunting engine with that of a trotting horse). And yet there is an implicit resistance to that formal sterility, because its result, a life defined according to a pattern, leaves him no room for discovery.

Contradictions in the religious guidance he receives also tease him:

> When they spoke of the prudent squirrel's hoard
> It shone like gifts at a nativity.
>
> When they spoke of the mammon of iniquity
> The coins in my pockets reddened like stove-lids.

As in the case of the speaker "weighing and weighing/[his] responsible *tristia*" in "Exposure", or imagining "Christ weighing by his hands" in

"Westering", the poet's dilemma here is that he is not fixed in his view, that he can never settle on a definitive way of making sense of his life. His mind is constantly on the move, so that as soon as he carefully and deliberately "place[s]" one "standard" in the poem, he feels a need to redress it.

> My left hand placed the standard iron weight.
> My right tilted a last grain in the balance.

In spite of an impulse or a desire to find equilibrium, the words used to convey this "balance" tilt the scale. The "grain", with its connotations of fertility and growth, has a different kind of weight in his poetry from "standard iron", with its inflexibility. This difference in kind makes it impossible for the "grain" and the "iron" to be weighed against each other. Yet even as these lines show that perfect balance is impossible, the structural immobility of the poem reflects the cost exacted by the attempt to respond to "the limit of each claim".

The title, "Terminus", and the sustained use of the simple past tense, imply that the poet recognizes the necessity to bid farewell to a way of directing his sight between two opposites, that he sees this way of seeing to be itself a dead end. In one sense, he is marking the bounds of this investigation here. But Terminus is the god of boundaries, and from a different perspective an ending can also be seen as a beginning—hence the sense of imminent mobility in the poem, the momentary balance on that "central stepping stone", and the feeling that the very creation of this poem can make new ways of seeing a possibility. The series of oppositions with which the poem opens can be read as progressive attempts to catch an elusive truth about being "in between", the inadequacy of each of these formulations giving rise to subversive and challenging "second

thoughts", as if the initial conception contained the seeds of its own undoing.

The final image of a man with one foot in the old world and one in the new, "Still parleying" because he feels the full weight of what is at stake, down to the "last grain", is an example of this. Stranded "in midstream", his desire to break the stalemate and go forward is complicated by his desire to allow "each claim" its proper value. He understands that negotiations can go on forever, making movement impossible, but understands too that to choose one side over the other might tilt the scales permanently.

This dilemma is a familiar one, to Heaney and to his readers. In returning to it here the poet is not just retreading old ground, but is responding to the challenge to try to go beyond a formulation which has so often proved a barrier to him. It might seem that in describing himself as an "earl on horseback", Heaney is posturing as a solitary, aloof figure (on his high horse), rather than trying to work something through, but the "last earl", I take it, refers to the legendary Hugh O'Neill, Earl of Tyrone, an almost symbolic figure in Irish history. Like Heaney, O'Neill was influenced by and attached to both English and Irish cultures, but at Kinsale in 1601, after a lifetime of hesitation and feeling "in between", he did tip the scales: as one writer puts it, "Gaelic self got the better of his Elizabethan self".[1] Roy Foster begins his history of Modern Ireland with this episode because, he says, "O'Neill . . . represents the Janus face of Ireland, whose ambivalence and elusiveness exhausted contemporaries and historians alike" (p. 4). Here, Heaney attempts to reinterpret his situation by subjecting his own "ambivalence and elusiveness" to the

---

[1]Robert Kee, *Ireland: A History* (London: Abacus), 1980, p.35.

kind of critical scrutiny he might give to Red Hugh, perceived by some to be a turncoat and by others to be a hero: to what extent is his "Janus face" his true face, and to what extent a mask or shield to hide behind?

> Two buckets were easier carried than one.
> I grew up in between.

What makes this poem a "terminus" itself, a place of departure as well as the end of a journey, is that it loosens the hold of a deeply-rooted conviction ("I grew up in between") on Heaney's imagination. But while it loosens it, it does not completely dislodge it. The final image of the earl endlessly "parleying", too prudent to change horses "in midstream" but unable to decide whether to advance or retreat, can be read as an image of stalemate in the midst of fluvial life, an image of imaginative death. Heaney may once have found it "easier" to carry "two buckets"; what he wants now is the ability to move forward without any buckets weighing him down, either holding him in balance or tipping him one way or the other.

Heaney has long been pressing on the idea that he cannot seem to choose one side over another, and searching for some definitive judgment. This search continues in this volume's title poem, "The Haw Lantern", where the poet envisages an external judge "scrutiniz[ing]" and "scan[ning]" him, and finally reaching a verdict. But that judge is not really external or objective: he is the product of the subject's very being—his breath on the frost ("haw"), his imagination:

> But sometimes when your breath plumes in the frost
> it takes the roaming shape of Diogenes
> with his lantern, seeking one just man . . .

In contrast with the way he inhales meaning in "Alphabets", here he breathes out an image of Diogenes, creates him out of his own need to be tested. This is no blank white page waiting to receive an impression, but

pale "frost" filling with the apparition which his alter ego takes in order to judge him. The "haw", the berry, its shape and brightness already suggestive of a lantern, lends itself to his predisposition for self-accusation, a need so deep that it "plumes" into the casually "roaming" figure of the cynic Diogenes who carried his lantern in broad daylight to emphasize the fruitlessness of his quest for "one just man". Like Diogenes, Heaney knows he is bound to fail the test he conjures up. Indeed there is no test he can impose on himself that would "clear" him, once and for all, and the poem does not imagine what such clearance might mean.

The haw lantern's "small light" is a counter to any dazzling hard-edged clarities life might offer. Modest expectations of "small people" have a chance of being met, whereas those who yearn for illumination (for what is called in "Exposure" the "once-in-a-lifetime . . . comet's pulsing rose") are sure to be disappointed, because they strive for the impossible. The poem suggests that Heaney—"in between", carrying two separate buckets—is at odds with the berry's "bonded" integrity. But the people who suffer the anguish of self-division are as "bonded" as the "pith and stone" of the haw itself. Being pulled in different directions is part of being alive, whether you are big or small. The observed detail of the berry's "pecked-at-ripeness" comes as a nice reminder that what the poet sees is actually a berry. The habit of mind which enables him to transform a single red berry into a symbol almost prevents him from seeing the berry as itself. When he superimposes the image of the lantern onto the berry, the simple natural properties of a small, bright berry are lost, transformed by his need for the "blood-prick" of the hawthorn to "test and clear" him once and for all.

Heaney feels that if he is to see the world afresh, he must surrender old vantage-points. The poems in this volume show him constantly attempting "to lose [him]self", believing in the promise in what his mother taught him: that if he could forget his own presence in the space between the hammer and the block, and with the right degree of relaxation and control "loosen" his hold on his conscious self, then familiar matters might form a new configuration. An example of such an attempt—one that does not quite come off—is "From the Frontier of Writing".

The speaker in this poem also expresses a wish to be cleared, by some authority beyond himself. Like his "flinch[ing]" counterpart in "The Haw Lantern", the subject of this poem endures scrutiny and "pure interrogation" from a marksman who, "like a hawk", and indeed like Diogenes, seems aloof or distanced from the uncertainty and doubt of ordinary mortals. The speaker's entire attention is focused on the need to cross the frontier; unlike the speaker in "Terminus", he does not want to linger, "parleying", nor does he want to think of himself as "the march drain and the march drain's banks". This poem, "From the Frontier of Writing", captures the intensity of his need to cross over into a new way of seeing. It hinges on the idea that the experience of being stopped at a military roadblock, interrogated, and finally allowed to cross the border resembles the experience of writing itself. The poem presents a writer as a driver who finds himself on the other side, "as if [he had] passed from behind a waterfall", out of limbo and into a blessed new life.

Helen Vendler writes that this "brilliant" poem "retells a narrow escape from hell"[2] on both frontiers, but a close reading reveals that there are

---

[2]"Second Thoughts," *New York Review of Books*, 28 April 1988, p.44.

distinct differences between the two "frontiers". At the physical frontier, a soldier "bends his face/towards your window" and others look "down cradled guns that hold you under cover". While this is threatening, the bent face, the cradle, and the cover also suggest that "you" are a baby or a child, "subjugated, yes, and obedient." As in the nursery or in school, the decisions that affect you are made by others. The poem claims that the experience of crossing the psychic frontier is the same: "it happens again". But here the language is more deadly, and the driver feels like prey. The guns are now unambiguously perched "on tripods", and the marksman does not "keep you under cover" but "train[s] down/out of the sun upon you like a hawk." In place of the "pure interrogation", with its suggestion of intense human evaluation, a "sergeant with his on-off mike" repeats "data" about you, and there is even a contrast in the way the driver is permitted to cross the frontier: in place of the "motion" of a hand-held rifle, there is the "squawk/of clearance". Nobody could reasonably expect to escape the glaring inadequacies of his own character under such scrutiny. The frontier of writing is colder, more impersonal and therefore more menacing than the geographical frontier. But the driver in the poem does escape in the last two stanzas:

> And suddenly you're through, arraigned yet freed,
> as if you'd passed from behind a waterfall
> on the black current of a tarmac road . . .

While this poem evokes the tension and "quiver" of another kind of "test", it only partly succeeds in crossing over the frontier of writing in the manner it claims, and partly denies the freedom of that passage. The parallels the poem discovers between the political roadblock and the moral and aesthetic roadblock do not simply or "suddenly" transport the speaker (or the reader—once again, the subject is "you") into the clarity

and brightness of a new imaginative country. What kind of "clearance" that harsh "squawk" might allow remains shadowy and blurred, but the language suggests something slow and unthreatening.

> the posted soldiers flowing and receding
> like tree shadows into the polished windscreen

If you move beyond the range of the soldiers, to a place where the menace that patrols your country is insubstantial, where are you? The speaker acknowledges that in crossing the frontier he enters another realm, an unreal, dream-like place in which the soldiers become "like tree shadows", transformed into benign sentinels. It is difficult to imagine any writing as concrete as the first six stanza of this poem, for instance, having its origin in such a "place".

II

Just as Heaney has long been drawn to boundaries and thresholds as metaphors to explore human dilemmas, so too he has looked at the relationship between various artists (or artisans) and their work to understand more about the nature of his own vocation. And this volume shows him coming back to that idea, circling this familiar terrain in search of a place, a moment, a metaphor, which will enable him to move forward. But persistence in pursuing an issue is no guarantee of a successful poem, and some of the poems in this volume seem to take him no further; but they do have a cumulative effect: the further he presses an issue, the closer he comes to discovering what he really wants to pursue. We can see this in a study of two poems set alongside each other: "The Stone Grinder" and "A Daylight Art". These poems explore, respectively, what it would be like to live an "unreward[ing]", and a creative life.

Heaney imagines the stone grinder looking back over his years of toil, and considering even Penelope's tedious years of weaving and unweaving to be more rewarding than the years he spent preparing the stone for lithographic prints. Unlike him, Penelope had, he thinks, "some guarantee of a plot", because she exerted some active control over her fate. He, by contrast, did not take such a risk, and as a result his life literally made no mark.

The stone grinder is not the artist, or the cartographer, he is the piece-worker entrusted with the precious, rare lithographic stone. His task is to grind the stone back until the surface is completely smooth, and to prepare it (by applying wax and resin) to receive the image. Unless the surface is perfect, the stone will not print. His is the essential first step in the production process, but that first step is cancelled as soon as the lithographer begins his "lining" and "inking". As the poem presents him, the stone grinder recognizes this, and accepts his part in the process:

> I ordained opacities and they haruspicated

"Ordained" suggests that he not only decrees that the stone is now ready for the process which will spoil his careful preparation, but also that he blesses that spoiling. His own doings are destined (another sense of "ordained") to be undone, and he accepts his part in the process of lithography, in the process of creating an image, of giving the darkness some meaning.

However, in terms of creation, what the stone grinder creates is blankness, not meaning. Although he is part of a cumulative process which has a natural end, the production of a "pile of old lithographs", he sees his own activity as a backward-going process that looks back to the quarry (or source) rather than forward to the lithographs (or product). The

proper image to capture or "commemorate" him must convey something of his facelessness, his invisibility. After all, people can recognize the original source (the stone), the "lining and inking" on the stone, and the paper end-product—but how can they envisage the missing stage in the process?

> So. To commemorate me. Imagine the faces
> stripped off the face of a quarry. Practise
> *coitus interruptus* on a pile of old lithographs.

His commemorative stone is blank, stripped of any lines that can be read or interpreted. He cannot be commemorated as a producer, i.e. by any visible product, only by a negative image of frustration. His work is part of a circle of production, but he has no interest in, even despises, the end product, "a pile of old lithographs". Yet he claims that "For me, it was coming full circle/like the ripple perfected in stillness."

It is difficult to believe that a stone grinder who envies Penelope would describe his job in this way ("I ordained opacities and they haruspicated"), but if despite his frustration he did feel superior to the primitive artists who took over from him, why the bitterness, which seems disproportionate, as well as out of character? The capacity to see the lithographers as haruspicating, superstitiously investing meaning into meaningless lines, implies that the stone grinder himself has some firmer grip on reality (i.e. that there are positives in his life). The complete absence of any meaning in the stone grinder's life is challenged by the testiness and asperity of his final utterance: his contempt for the end product (and the fuss often made about it?) is a very positive response, and modifies all the imagery of absence and blankness that have preceded it.

In a review of this volume, Neil Corcoran observes that it is "a book very much of its literary-critical moment", and one which "offers a more demanding scrutiny of writerly procedures—of 'script' and 'story'—than anything in Heaney's career to date."[3] Corcoran's remark may be usefully applied to "The Stone Grinder", where an interest in deconstructivist ideas about absence seems to be closer to the poem's origins that any personal experience of the poet, who is more likely to align himself with the lithographer, the artist, than with the worker who prepares the surface for his own marks. "The Stone Grinder", like "From the Frontier of Writing", shows Heaney experimenting in a new way with familiar ideas, but the inadequacy of the parallel between poet and stone grinder makes the experiment less than a complete success.

"Happy the man . . . with a natural gift/for practising the right [art] from the start". These somewhat banal lines come from "A Daylight Art", in which another model for the poet is tested. This poem imagines the last day in Socrates' life, when his past had caught up with him, and suggests that even a wise and gifted man can misinterpret his life's meaning and value. Socrates is presented as a man who "advocated the examined life", but whose dream kept recurring because he was not interpreting it correctly. In dreams, submerged truths arise and can take you over if you are not fulfilling your destiny—not "practising the right [art]". Yet the poem presents the adoption of the "right" art as a happy accident rather than a choice, a natural *gift* which is not granted to everyone. The poem suggests that while Socrates (who might appear to be an exemplary case of someone with the "gift" of an "art") practised the wrong art, Norman MacCaig, the dedicatee, got it right: his poetry is "A Daylight Art", not a

---

[3]"From the Frontier of Writing," *Times Literary Supplement*, 26 June 1987, p. 681.

product of the spooks and phantasms of the night. His dreams and his life are one, and together pass, miraculously, through his "nib's eye", onto the page.

As a counter image to the frustration of the stone grinder this is very positive, and it is a warm tribute to MacCaig. But do either of these extremes, as Heaney conveys them, capture the tricky relationship between creation and frustration? The image of "deep-sunk panoramas" which "rise and pass/like daylight through . . . the nib's eye" oversimplifies the process of creating a poem, rather as the imagery of absence in the earlier poem oversimplifies the process of piece-work.

The point to which Heaney's explorations have taken him is somewhere "in between" these two extremes. But he is not floating, perfectly balanced. He is moving to different sides, but is nevertheless firmly anchored in a reality where frustration and dreams, satisfaction and daylight, all contribute to the meaning of his own life. He must *practise* his art, like Socrates and like the stone grinder: he must keep at it, in pursuit of perfection. But there is also the suggestion in "practise" that you must keep doing the same thing. It is as if, paradoxically, the only way to find yourself on new ground is to keep going over familiar terrain. I think again of the lines in Heaney's early poem "The Plantation", in *Door into the Dark*:

> You had to come back
> To learn how to lose yourself.

All through *The Haw Lantern* we see Heaney "com[ing] back"to his earliest subjects, but in a new way. The elegy "In Memoriam Robert Fitzgerald", for example, "commemorate[s]" Heaney's colleague in terms of his vocation. The poem makes no separation between Fitzgerald's life and work. The nature of that work, translating, is represented as entering

a doorway that opens onto an unending series of doorways, and this is also an image of his life. The reference to the way the socket of the axehead is fitted—two different materials abutted into each other to make something new—is also an expression of admiration for what the translator can do. Like the sturdy architecture of a tomb that will last for ages, the axehead too is an appropriate reminder of the Homer Fitzgerald loved so much. The poem ends with an image of his life as the true, straight flight of Odysseus' arrow, and his death the arrow's "migration" as it "travels out of all knowing/Perfectly aimed towards the vacant centre." The poem is a tribute, more a celebration of Fitzgerald's life than an expression of grief. It presents his life as valuable because it all seemed to come together, but it is the poem itself which brings it all together: there is no place for the frustrations and loose ends that are part of any life of commitment, any serious activity of the mind, and which Fitzgerald must have experienced, along with challenges and rewards, in his efforts to translate Homer. But if for Fitzgerald "The great test [is] over", there is no sense of that "test" in the poem. When a life is seen in retrospect the patterns can be discerned, and anything not in the pattern fades into the background, so what you are left with is not a life (messy, complicated, contradictory and continually new) but a crafted, selected interpretation. Robert Fitzgerald is definitely dead, and Heaney translates him here.

There are a number of commemorative poems in *The Haw Lantern*, and a number of ways of commemorating or interpreting the meaning of a life. Where the relationship between the interpreter and the life is more intimate, it is correspondingly more difficult to fit all the aspects of a life together, and the poem is inevitably less resolved. "In Memoriam Robert Fitzgerald" offers an interesting contrast to "The Stone Verdict", a poem

which commemorates someone who maintained a suspicion of language throughout his life. According to Helen Vendler (p.42), the subject of this poem is Heaney's father, and it may be that the father's well-known aversion to "sweet talk" is instrumental in setting the tone of the son's poem. Heaney tries to capture the nature of this man who is "maimed" by self-doubt, yet whose strength and identity are suggested by his "disdain of sweet talk and excuses" in others. This poem is not "sweet talk": while the man's strength and resolution are emphasized, and even a stately, natural dignity conveyed in the imagery, the hard, cold and inflexible connotations of stone remain.

"The Stone Verdict" reveals how the son cannot help wishing that his father had spoken more. When the poet tries to say that being silent makes one strong, he finds that if this is true it puts his own life into question, because for him language is the medium through which he relates to life. Heaney knows his own weaknesses for "sweet talk", his love of language for the beauty and richness of its sound, and he sees his father's "disdain" and silence as a counter-strength that he could sometimes do with. But he also knows what happens when you never reveal yourself, never trust yourself enough to be vulnerable. Another poem, the seventh sonnet in "Clearances", presents the father by his wife's death-bed, saying more to her than ever before, more of value, and revealing more of himself. The poet records this as the only time the family remembers that he ever spoke to her as a lover, and is glad. But there is also some regret that the woman had to be dying before her husband could open himself to her in this way.

Is a life knowable—can the stone or block of coal be split open in a way which illuminates the relationship between its parts? Heaney wants to

think so, and his figuring of his father as a god is an attempt to catch his unique, outstanding quality as a man. But we need to ask how close a resemblance exists between Hermes and the firmly planted figure of the opening lines, with "his stick in his hand and the broad hat/Still on his head"? Heaney's interest in etymology may inform him that Hermes was indeed "God of the stone heap"; he was also the lithe messenger of the gods, with his hat and his stick, who had promised never to lie, but who often cunningly chose to leave certain things unsaid. "The Stone Verdict" is undecided on the question of whether silence—the refusal to speak—is to be valued as a sign of strength or to be judged as a weakness. Maybe Heaney is too close to, and too far from, his father to be able to separate the old man's distinctive qualities from his own conflicting thoughts about silence and language. He does not want to wait until his father is on his deathbed to hear some intimate communication. "The Stone Verdict" is an unusual poem, an elegy which anticipates the man's absence before the speaker has felt the actual loss. It erects his headstone before he is dead.

It seems easier for Heaney to write the elegy "The Wishing Tree" to a woman who gave so much to others that there is no question as to the value of her life. Again, Vendler's explanation (p.42) that the poem commemorates Heaney's mother-in-law corroborates the feeling in the poem that there is affection, yet distance.

> I thought of her as the wishing tree that died
> And saw it lifted, root and branch, to heaven,
> Trailing a shower of all that had been driven
>
> Need by need by need into its hale
> Sap-wood and bark: coin and pin and nail
> Came streaming from it like a comet-tail
>
> New-minted and dissolved. I had a vision
> Of an airy branch-head rising through damp cloud,
> Of turned-up faces where the tree had stood.

The speaker's feelings for the woman are not entangled and dangerous—freeing him to have an almost magical vision of her as a tree that ascended into the heavens, with all the sins and coins flooding out in a sparkly comet-tail. It is almost a starry-eyed elegy, full of the sense of her value and meaning but not maimed or pained by any sense of her being wrenched from him. From first to last ("I thought of her" and "I had a vision") the poet is conscious of the fact that he is re-making this woman in his poem, "dissolv[ing]" the image of her as a "hale" and sturdy person to whom people came with their endless "need[s]" and "New-mint[ing]" her into a "vision" which would leave the "need[y]" gazing in wonder.

III

In the sequence of sonnets called "Clearances" Heaney tests and examines what his mother's life, and her absence through death, mean to him, and tries to understand the nature and value of their relationship. The title, "Clearances", offers a way into these poems, with its suggestions of making a space, opening rather than narrowing or closing an issue. "Clearances" also implies the presence of obstacles, things that have to be cleared away or dealt with in order for progress to be made. The time of a mother's death is a clearance time, and these poems are about the space that her death makes in Heaney's life.

In the opening poem the "cobble thrown a hundred years ago" gives Heaney access to his own history. Like his great-grandmother who chose to cross the boundaries of her faith by marriage, Heaney also refuses to confine himself to one side of an issue. But he, too, knows the accusation of "turncoat" and traitor. Heaney cannot share the black and white, either/or mentality of the extremists. The religion to which she comes

welcomes her as " 'The Convert' "; the people she deserts see her as " 'The Exogamous Bride' ". He can understand the "trap" that she is in: she is an outsider who will never be fully accepted by either side. The poem suggests that Heaney understands the "trap" because the stone that came through history "Keeps coming at" him, like an after-effect.

The stone is a legacy, coming to him through his mother's side of the family, as the capacity to split the coal block came, too, via her uncle.

> Instead of silver and Victorian lace,
> The exonerating, exonerated stone.

The falling movement of these lines suggests that the stone, too, has come to rest, that in coming to him it has found its proper place. It is his "to dispose with" (not to dispose of): he can decide its meaning and value. What "Keeps coming at [him]" is not the stone, but the idea of the stone: the ramifications of being stony and unyielding. For Heaney, the stone thrown at his great-grandmother shatters what others try to keep intact.

In one sense then, the stone is "exonerating" him: he can now feel that he is on the right side, i.e. not with the stone throwers, but with the throwees. On the other hand, he is intimate with this kind of "tribal revenge" (he aligned himself with the stone-throwers in "Punishment"), and this sympathetic understanding exonerates them. The stone-throwers do not want change, which they see as betrayal, yet Heaney understands that life cannot be preserved unchanged without great cost. The last line of this sonnet has the poet on "a central stepping stone", poised between "exonerated, exonerating", and we wonder if it is not asking whether he would cross the border his great-grandmother did.

In the third sonnet the poet recalls a special time, a moment when he was "all hers", at his mother's side in the woman's domain, peeling potatoes. The communion between them is wordless, only the potatoes

break the silence. "[A]ll the others [are] away at Mass", but mother and son have their own religious bond. There is a suggestion of sorrow in the potatoes dropping like tears, "Like solder weeping off the soldering iron". (Here the image of the solder turns on its head the horrific bonding of Ugolino and Archbishop Roger, "soldered together" in Hell, in *Field Work*.) The hint of sadness comes from the realization that the time in which they can share these sorts of activities is short, not only because "the others" will soon be back, but because, as a boy, he will soon be considered too old to share moments like these. His mother makes a space for him to come for a short time into her world, and there he is made clean by the sharing of the water. There is a suggestion of the "fall" recovered, of an Eden regained in their moments together, and also the idea that the kind of religious feeling the two share enables her to live forever.

The sestet of the sonnet contrasts their moments of soft togetherness with the priest's hard "hammer and tongs" activity. While the priest works at her dying, the son remembers her living:

> I remembered her head bent towards my head,
> Her breath in mine, our fluent dipping knives –

Although she is dead, her breath has mingled with his; when their heads were so close together, their knives "dipping" like oars as if they are in the same boat, her spirit entered him; and as her life comes to an end he recaptures the supreme moment:

> Never closer the whole rest of our lives.

The kind of perfect "fluency" they share as their heads are bent together over the potatoes is contrasted with the stilted movement of the fourth sonnet, which describes how the poet's mother kept her verbal fluency in check out of loyalty to those who were "hampered and inadequate" when

it came to speech, and we think of Heaney's description of his father as a man "maimed by self-doubt/And an old disdain of sweet-talk . . . " ( "A Stone Verdict").

> She'd manage something hampered and askew
> Every time, as if she might betray
> The hampered and inadequate by too
> Well-adjusted a vocabulary.

"Well-adjusted" suggests that though she dressed as if she did not want the words to "fit", underneath she shared her son's feeling for language. Heaney's mother received from her grandmother another legacy. In her blood she knows what betrayal means: she is from the side of the family that is different (the Protestant strain), descended from the woman who betrayed her faith, her people, her heritage, and crossed over. She cannot afford to betray the "hampered and inadequate", for she feels acceptable only when she looks, sounds and seems to think like "all the others". She wears her protective colouring even with her son, not acknowledging openly how much they have in common. But the son sees through her disguise; he recognizes that she is not "hampered and inadequate", and that his gift with words, like so much else he values, is "Inherited on [his] mother's side". And like her, he can also "manage something . . . askew" or oblique when the occasion calls for it (as, for example, when the old fisherman turns the conversation to the subject of poetry in "Casualty"). In this sonnet, the small space between mother and son, "the wrong/ Grammar", is at once the space which separates them and the place where their worlds meet:

> . . . I'd *naw* and *aye*
> And decently relapse into the wrong
> Grammar which kept us allied and at bay.

Their "touch and go" relationship is caught in the near-rhyme of "aye" and "bay", where the sounds touch, but do not quite match up.

The bond between mother and son is further explored in the sixth sonnet, where the church replaces the kitchen as the scene of their sharing, but the atmosphere, and some of the language, is very much the same. "Dippings", for instance, is common to both rituals, and the "Towellings" and "tinkle" of cruets also belong in the kitchen as well as the church. Here they are "Elbow to elbow", and in the kitchen "her head bent towards [his] head", rather as it does in communion. These similarities have the effect of giving both scenes a sacred status.

The boy is oblivious to the people in "the packed church"; he feels as if they were the only two present:

> Elbow to elbow, glad to be kneeling next
> To each other up there near the front
> Of the packed church, we would follow the text
> And rubrics for the blessing of the font.
> *As the hind longs for the streams, so my soul . . .*
> Dippings. Towellings. The water breathed on.
> The water mixed with chrism and with oil.
> Cruet tinkle. Formal incensation
> And the psalmist's outcry taken up with pride:
> *Day and night my tears have been my bread.*

What they share is the mysterious ritual—not just the oil, the chrism and the incense, but also the language of the Psalms, so unlike the "hampered . . . inadequate" talk they both accept as part of the life in the home. Mother and son alone, we gather, thrill to that sort of language and ritual, and the special liturgy of the church provides their only chance to do it together. Now that she is dead, the words of the Psalmist take on a new meaning for the poet.

The same kind of game-playing strategies they engage in to manage their complicity in a world of "hampered inadequa[cy]" are evident in the memory of folding sheets together in the fourth sonnet. It is as if the poet has a number of glimpses of their life together which at first do not seem very connected—peeling potatoes, attending church ceremonies, folding

sheets—but these separate vignettes all add up to something very powerful. This poem about folding sheets is literally at the centre of the "Clearances" sequence, and also at the centre of Heaney's exploration of the relationship between his mother's life (and life's work) and his own. The actions of the sheet-folding imitates the moves or turns in a noughts and crosses game, like a solemn ritual dance. The "cross-wind" shape which the sheet takes on as it is tugged is represented by the "x", and the looping movement of the folding by the "o". And "Clearances" is a sequence of nine poems, within which the figures of mother and son ("I was x and she was o") play out a private game, sparring to prevent each other from having it all their own way. Now that his mother is dead (she has become "o" in another sense), the poet tries to understand or get the measure of himself through her, to determine the unknown "x" in his own life.

As they fold the sheets, mother and son are both in control of their moves, and while they do not speak they do communicate. Their shared silence differs from the "speechlessness" of the father. The poem opens with the son doubting the mother's judgment, but finding that the domestic round is her field of expertise, and her language: it is through her work that she expresses herself.

> The cool that came off sheets just off the line
> Made me think the damp must still be in them
> But when I took my corners of the linen
> And pulled against her, first straight down the hem
> And then diagonally, then flapped and shook
> The fabric like a sail in a cross-wind,
> They made a dried-out undulating thwack.

Ian Hamilton makes fun of the way "donnish critics" respond to the

"onomatapoeic side" of Heaney: "(. . . 'You'll notice how the "thwa-" of "thwack" is shyly answered by the "plu-" of "plump".')"[4] Mindful of Hamilton's caution, I still hear in "thwack" an unspoken rebuke, as if the sheets speak out for the woman's good judgment. Yet that "thwack" being Heaney's word, chosen after her death, suggests that the game of o's and x's is an ongoing one in his mind, and that his thoughts about her stretch out and fold in now just as his actions did when she was alive.

The tension or pulling needed to fold the sheets properly conveys the little battle of wills between the two until they "end up hand to hand":

> So we'd stretch and fold and end up hand to hand
> For a split second as if nothing had happened
> For nothing had that had not always happened
> Beforehand, day by day, just touch and go,
> Coming close again by holding back
> In moves where I was x and she was o
> Inscribed in sheets she'd sewn from ripped-out flour sacks.

In that "split second" Heaney has the hammer on the grain; he almost splits the coal-block, splits the experience open. After the "split second" comes the reflection, and when he tries to hold the meaning of the moment, it "moves". The alternating rhythms and the "hampered", awkward arrangement of the words not only mirror the rhythms of a noughts and crosses game, they catch something of the "touch and go" nature of human relationships, where in fleeting moments you "see" the value of what you have got, but most of the time the moments pass unnoticed. The repetition of the "a" sound creates a stuttering awkward poetry, as if to suggest that just as Heaney could not "split" the moment and the experience completely open in life, so he also fails to fix it in poetry—"touch and go", almost having it, is as much as he can do. In "holding back", from spoiling the moment, he came "close again": close to

---

[4]"Excusez-moi," *London Review of Books*, 1 October 1987, p.10.

her, and close to the child he was when for a split second he almost understood what they meant to each other. The moves they made, the ritual dance of the sheet-folding is "inscribed" in his memory, and as Helen Vendler points out, the son also folds inscribed sheets for a living. But the sheets that he values here are the ones that she had made with her own hands. He remembers the "ripped-out flour sacks", the vigorous way she managed the hard times on the farm, and sees her life story written into those sheets with their fading print. Just as in "The Stone Verdict" Heaney erects a monument to his father, in "Clearances" he inscribes his mother's epitaph.

The second sonnet tries to imagine the woman's death as a return to being a daughter, rejoining her parents in their heavenly home. While the polish of "Number 5, New Row, Land of the Dead" suggests the refinement (the unchipped cups) that the mother had left behind her when she married (into a life of flour-bag sheets), Heaney cannot imagine that this radiant and idealized place is better than the earthly home she has left: everything shines a little too brightly, and is uncomfortably perfect.

The seventh sonnet conveys, rather than talks about, the "tightness and nilness round that space" which Heaney describes in "From the Frontier of Writing". Heaney's father knows that their marriage has introduced his wife to a life substantially different from the one she lived with her parents. If in some ways he introduced her to hardship, in others he liberated her from the particular constraints of her parents' household. He gave her space to become a much-loved woman; the opportunity to become a wife and mother who enriched the lives of her family and was in turn enriched by her children. When he bends over her death-bed to

talk lovingly to her, their heads come together in the way that the son recognizes from his own time with his mother in the kitchen. The husband expresses his gratitude and love for his wife, makes an eternal commitment to her which is reminiscent of the way in which he courted her long ago. "In the last minutes" the space between them was bridged, so that her way out of life is eased by the rare gift of his words.

By the act of dying, taking herself from the family, she "exonerate[s]" them, lifts from them the burden of her death:

> And we all knew one thing by being there.
> The space we stood around had been emptied
> Into us to keep, it penetrated
> Clearances that suddenly stood open.
> High cries were felled and a pure change happened.

The poet does not stand in a grey, misty forest of uncertainty and self-accusation, but find himself in an "open" clearing. It is as if her spirit was telling him that his love for her did not need to be tested or weighed by the depth of his grief; that he could receive the gift of her grace without guilt or fear.

But when, in the final sonnet, Heaney tries to think of his life going on when his mother's has ended, he finds himself thinking of

> . . . walking round and round a space
> Utterly empty, utterly a source
> Where the decked chestnut tree had lost its place
> In our front hedge above the wallflowers.

"Walking round and round a space" is something that Heaney has written about before, in *Station Island*:

> I thought of walking round
> and round a space utterly empty,
> utterly a source, like the idea of sound;
>
> like an absence stationed in the swamp-fed air.
> (Section III)

Heaney is not simply repeating himself here. With the death of his mother he too has in a sense "lost [his] place", and looks for something in the past that can help him with this new experience. The space he thinks of walking round is a different space now from the awful emptiness in *Station Island;* as well as being "utterly empty", this space where the "Deep planted and long gone" chestnut tree used to be is "utterly a source". Heaney's thinking about the chestnut tree in his attempt to grasp his mother's essential nature recalls the great question at the end of Yeats's poem, "Among School Children":

> O chestnut-tree, great-rooted blossomer,
> Are you the leaf, the blossom or the bole?
> O body swayed to music, O brightening glance,
> How can we know the dancer from the dance?
> (*Collected Poems*, p.245)

Heaney feels that the loss of his mother involves the loss of part of himself; but in his mind she is still there, "ramifying" in the way that the tree used to. His mind turns to the destruction of his "coeval" tree in search of a way to release some of his "shock", and the repeated choking sounds of the consonants do suggest how his feelings reverberate within him.

> I heard the hatchet's differentiated
> Accurate cut, the crack, the sigh
> And collapse of what luxuriated
> Through the shocked tips and wreckage of it all.

These lines realize Heaney's early ambition to "set the darkness echoing". But he now wants to do more than that in his poetry. He presses hard on the parallel between the death of his motherand the chopping-down of a tree that "luxuriated" and "skited high" in its prime, and finds that his experience of wonder, as well as grief, at his mother's death lets him see the loss of the tree in a new way, as if he had never fully appreciated it when it was luxuriating, never examined the "tips" or saw

its individual brightness until it was gone. And thinking about the tree helps him appreciate his mother, to realize how much more there was to her than the selflessness which he had always taken for granted. He discovers how absence, instead of being just a negative, can be a "source" from which other understandings can grow. It is difficult to suggest the presence of an absence, but in this poem Heaney overcomes that difficulty; we respond to the "heft and hush" of the absent tree because, like his mother, it lives on in him. Each of them has become

> A soul ramifying and forever
> Silent, beyond silence listened for.

"Clearances" not only describes what the poet gained in understanding through the death of his mother; it suggests how he has learned the lesson she taught him: "to loosen", and "to listen", and so transform the chopping down of the tree, and the loss of his mother, into meaning. Instead of being weighed down, he himself is lightened by not having to turn her death into self-accusation. It seems as if before his mother's death he was never free of guilt. In the process of writing these poems he has rediscovered that he can breathe in not just the object but the space that the object has occupied.

His mother's death, then, is a genuine "Terminus" for Heaney's poetry, and the epigraph to the volume points to the importance he attaches to this discovery:

> The riverbed, dried-up, half-full of leaves.
>
> Us, listening to a river in the trees.

From one perspective, the choked and halting movement of the first line seems to tell an unequivocal story: the flow has stopped, the water has evaporated, leaving only an arid space "half-full" of leaves which, in their turn, have also "dried up" and fallen from the trees. But as the old

wisdom reminds us, what one eye sees as "half-full" another may see as half-empty, and just as it is true that everything in life withers like leaves, it is also true that everything in life flows. To the "us" in the fluid second line, the source is never completely "dried-up", because it flows through them. By means of memory and imagination, they achieve the seemingly impossible, "listening to a river in the trees" while acknowledging the reality that the river had dried up. In the provisional pause between its two lines, its two ways of seeing, this little poem literally presents a space between acceptance of the actual and reaching for the possible. It is like the two banks of the river, where the space in between, which seems arid, can fill again.

IV

The cleared space that Heaney walks around in this volume, the terrain he now cricles, is no longer a physical one. It is the world of sign and symbol which his development has brought him to, the landscape of his own imagination. In a sense, his vocation as a poet has called him away from the physical world of his beginnings, has made him into an expatriate whose life is now in the country of language. There seems to be no way other than metaphor to convey this move, and in a series of allegorical poems Heaney actually foregrounds this idea. Allegories depend for their effect on the fact that they are at one remove from the real, that rather than capturing reality they symbolically re-present it. The appeal of this method to Heaney is that it can make a virtue of a change which, seen in a different way, might appear to be a loss. *The Haw Lantern* offers poems "From the Canton of Expectation" or "From the Republic of Conscience", for example, making it plain that they are abstracted from

the physical geography of the world and emanate "from" a psychic or moral sphere.

The critical question is not whether these offerings are successful as allegories, but to what degree they are successful as poems, and the answer, I think, varies within the poems as well as from poem to poem. To my mind, the ideas that are treated in the abstract in these poems are often more concretely present in Heaney's more traditional poems. "From the Land of the Unspoken", for example, is less successful in imagining the ramifications of speech and speechlessness than the more subtly accessible exploration of this idea in "Clearances". On the other hand, the allegorical form does free Heaney's imagination of some of the constraining aspects of circling around the same ground, and in "The Mud Vision", for example, he takes the very stuff of his earliest poetry, the mud of the farm and the flax-dam, the clay that he keeps coming back to, and transfigures it; he "spins" the mud into poetry, performs the miracle he saw the "Thatcher" perform, when he turned straw in to gold.

Like the thatcher, though, Heaney is exposed to danger by this "Midas touch", as we see for example in the final poem in the volume, "The Riddle", which tries to "sift the sense of things from what's imagined". It imagines an old-fashioned sieve, a riddle ("You never saw it"), as an image of the mind's difficulty in separating what is valuable in life from what is disposable, and tries to find an answer to its own riddling questions in the "mime" of a workman sifting "Clods":

Which would be better, what sticks or what falls through?
Or does the choice itself create the value?

Legs apart, deft-handed, start a mime
To sift the sense of things from what's imagined

And work out what was happening in that story
Of the man who carried water in the riddle.

Was it culpable ignorance, or was it rather
A *via negativa* through drops and let-downs?

Heaney has attained a new degree of self-consciousness, and the familiar "drops and let-downs" here are a kind of shorthand reference to "Exposure" and even back to "Personal Helicon". The challenge facing him is how to incorporate his old need to make things concrete in his poetry into his present imaginative self. "What was happening in that story" is instructive for Heaney. Firstly, the man (a Simple Simon figure) did *not* carry water in the riddle, that was the point. But the many versions of the story which feature a girl sent to the well to collect water in the riddle as a test, have an ending that is interesting in the context of Heaney's poetry. The well-spirit, or the fairy, takes her down into the dark depths where she learns the secret, and when she emerges she is able to perform the apparently impossible task by taking up handfuls of mud and smearing the riddle with it, sealing up its gaps and spaces.

Heaney's allegorical poems are riddles themselves. The main reason for choosing an allegory is to make meaning more accessible by expressing it in terms of something else rather than by direct representation. The moral is not stated: the gap between the allegory and its meaning has to be bridged by the listener, and it is often difficult to be certain what the real point of the story is, because it enigmatically seems to offer different, even apparently conflicting points. The poem "Parable Island" illustrates these difficulties. The name of the poem denies any specific application, but on

the most rudimentary level, it seems to be drawing a parallel between Ireland and the "island" of its title: both places are "occupied"; both have an internal boundary; they share a geological feature (basalt); and in each case the names of places "shift" to signify the speakers' different relationships with the land:

> The occupiers call it Cape Basalt.
> The Sun's Headstone, say farmers in the east.
> Drunken westerners call it The Orphan's Tit.

These "natives" pretend not to believe, but do believe, that there is "a point where all the names converge", where there is one ideal name or language which constitutes "the ore of truth", and which contains in itself all of these apparently different names. So they all believe in the possibility of union and harmony. But they believe in it only as long as no attempt is made to put the theory to the test. Is this an opportunity for Heaney to be more cynical than he could be on his "own" terrain? The poem suggests that the people need to believe in the existence of "the ore of truth" and that one day it will be "mined", they cannot ever dig all the way back to "autocthonous tradition" because with this discovery, the reality they had hitherto believed in, and lived by, would become a lie. But the speaker (Heaney) sees that this "truth" cannot be the possession of only one "school" of thought. Despite detailed attempts to tell "the island story", the "ore of truth" remains buried beneath layers of interpretation and mediation. From one point of view there may appear to be no grounds for the belief of the old man who (in a story within the story) "died convinced"

> that the cutting of the Panama Canal
> would mean the ocean would all drain away
> and the island disappear by aggrandizement.

But there may be a corresponding, larger truth contained in the elders' story: modern engineering and advances *have* caused the world to shrink, so that it seems true that the distinctive features of and boundaries between individual cultures are "disappear[ing] by aggrandizement."

Yet the "min[ing]" of the parable can go deeper. Instead of being read as Heaney's distanced, showing-all-sides picture of Ireland, the "island" might be interpreted as Heaney's sense of his own identity. In this reading, the poet who has left his own "country" becomes "the traveller/[who] has to keep listening",

> . . . since there is no map
> which draws the line he knows he must have crossed.

He realizes he has crossed a new "frontier", one of many borders which he has erected for himself, testing himself first against the actual and now against the metaphorical journey. Heaney's poetry is also mined by "missionary scribes" and "archaeologists" who "vie" for the "right to set 'the [Heaney] story' straight". While he "pretend[s] not to believe" in their prophecies or the layers of interpretation and "glosses" they put upon his work, he is not an "island", and is not impervious to the outside interest of scribes, "collaborators" or "subversives".

The meaning of the allegory remains elusive, enigmatic and dream-like. But whether the subject is Ireland, or Heaney, or some more universal experience, there is a sense of the poet himself "mining" the form of the allegory in order to allow for a further level of interpretation. Heaney's adoption of a wittily detached voice in this poem implies that he seems to know it all, or at least knows more that the "natives" who are "mired in attachment" as he once was ("Antaeus") and lack his unmuddied, bird's eye view. The light tone of this poem further suggests that Heaney has freed himself of the muddiness of life. But it is a freedom

achieved at a cost: that lightness is very close to light-weight, and while "Parable Island" is entertaining, it strikes me as almost a throwaway poem compared with some of Heaney's best work, and by this I do not only mean his most consciously serious poems. For instance, the tone in another allegorical poem, "From the Republic of Conscience" is light too, but with a completely different effect.

This poem imagines "Conscience" as a place new and strange, yet also familiar. Heaney puts his beliefs to the test as he tries to imagine what it means to be a person of conscience, not from his own point of view, but from that of a sophisticated person who (somewhat unexpectedly) "land[s]" in the republic and tries to catch the essential qualities of the place. Presenting "Conscience" as an allegorical place gives Heaney a way of looking freshly at what it means: if he wants to write the truth about conscience he must take take in the opposite of all that is taken for granted. Despite the serious subject in this poem, "Conscience" as Heaney imagines it is an old-fashioned place, indeed it is exaggeratedly outmoded, as if the poem is asking whether the concept of a conscience can still be taken seriously. The couple at the border, for example, are almost comically "homespun":

> At immigration, the clerk was an old man
> who produced a wallet from his homespun coat
> and showed me a photograph of my grandfather.
>
> The woman in customs asked me to declare
> the words of our traditional cures and charms
> to heal dumbness and avert the evil eye.

There is a sense in which, despite its archaic superstitions, Heaney belongs in this "republic"; he cannot laughingly dismiss these simple folk as not living in the real world, because for him they are in some deeply rooted way more real than the sophisticated traveller. Heaney belongs in

the republic for two reasons; first because only a person who had some sense of conscience could enter into this sort of mental excursion, and secondly because his fascination with the customs and beliefs and omens reveals him to have something in common with the "woman in customs" who cherishes folklore and the man at immigration who places importance on family ties. The imaginary expedition to the Republic is itself an act of conscience, but there is no sense of self-congratulation in the poem, and the old man's "official recognition" is offered as a counter to any merely self-ratifying sense of belonging to both worlds.

Anyone can belong to this "Republic of Conscience", for its "embassies" are "everywhere", but it is not a place where someone can wander in and out, comfortably confident of belonging. "Conscience" demands serious responsibilities, and the person who goes there becomes a "dual citizen". He continues to be part of his own socially-structured world, to be responsive to its demands and prohibitions, but he also owes allegiance to a "noiseless" world where those familiar social lines, external structures and boundaries do not apply, where the "omen[s]" and even the belief in the origins of life are strange to him. The citizen of "Conscience" is expected to negotiate a life between the two. What is demanded of him is great; he must henceforward live not on the boundary or edge, but *in* both worlds—in a moral and physical world where conflicting claims may be made on him, but where he must respond "to the limits of each claim" ("Terminus").

"Conscience" becomes an internal place where a person must decide the moral quality of his actions or motives without the promptings of external rules which say what is to be approved, and what is to be condemned. Because the arbiter is internal, there is no "relief" in the form

of knowing that a decision is the right one, no "squawk of clearance"; nor is the ambassador to "Conscience" ever "relieved" in the sense that he can have a break—to be a person of conscience is to be committed for life. When Richard Ellman and Helen Vendler each states (in exactly the same words) that Heaney is "no longer a believer",[5] they recognize only his distance from the precepts of Catholicism. They do not specify what he no longer believes in, or take into account the beliefs which he still holds dear, but write as if belief is a simple black and white entity which is either fully possessed or completely left behind. But in many ways to be a poet is to be a believer—and a doubter, an imaginer, and a rememberer. Heaney's "belief" has not been lost, or abandoned, but has changed form as he has come around to a realization that conscience "operate[s] independently", and to feel that independent belief cuts him off from the body of the church.

This tendency or urge to break things down into manageable parts is further explored in the poem "From the Canton of Expectation". A canton is a man-made division or subdivision, often political, which partitions off one section of a country or city in order to manage it more effectively. While the word in the title refers specifically to the social insulation the poem explores, it also relates to Heaney's formal attempts to manage this exploration. The structuring of thought and imagination is mirrored in the formal structure of the poem itself, which is divided into three separate sections, three phases of history, three grammatical moods. But the poem's discovery is that an urge to break things down into manageable portions is confounded by their resistance to the process.

---

[5] in *Seamus Heaney*, ed. Harold Bloom, p.163 and pp.167-68.

The opening section presents a picture of a confined way of life, buried "deep in a land" and "under high, banked clouds". The mood in this "canton" was the now-defunct optative, the inhabitants' wishes merely vague, unspecified yearnings for something whose absence they sensed but which they seemed to have lost the capacity to define. As in "Parable Island", the speaker exhibits a degree of critical detachment which separates him from the inhabitants of the canton who expect nothing to change in their lifetime, but entangled with it is a sense of solidarity with them, evident from the very first word, "We". Like the person at "the frontier of writing" in the earlier poem, the people in the "Canton of Expectation" have become "subjugated . . . and obedient", so resigned to the confines imposed on them from without that they judge it "creditable" to live with a "broken nerve". Even the once-a-year occasion for them to celebrate and rediscover their distinct cultural wealth is shown to be controlled and contained, even destroyed by the unsubtle "Iron-mouthed loudspeakers", through which the songs the children sing "by rote" and "the humiliations" the "auctioneer" lists are translated into a distorted blare. There is disillusionment in (as well as understanding of) the auctioneer, who had once made a stand, "enumerat[ing] the humiliations" without passion, as though they relate to another world, and "confirm[ing]" their belief that any change would be beyond them. Just as the noise which shakes the air fails to shake up the people, so their "rebel anthem" (designed to "call [them] to "action") has become a mere formality to "play . . . the meeting shut", and the speaker registers this change without expressing either approval or regret. There is a latent recognition that the "militiamen" and "roadblocks" are there "overtime",

but their continued presence is accepted as "usual" by the people, and by the speaker.

The second section of the poem charts a "change of mood", from "optative" to "imperative", which seems to come about inexplicably ("suddenly"), as if the heart of the home, the kitchen, is "wired" for change.

> And next thing, suddenly, this change of mood.
> Books open in the newly-wired kitchens.
> Young heads that might have dozed a life away
> against the flanks of milking cows were busy
> paving and pencilling their first causeways
> across the prescribed texts. . . .

The dreams of the children are no longer bounded by the "flanks of milking cows", because through education they can construct a way of going beyond the surrounding fields. Presented with authoritative, "prescribed texts" that might once have been beyond question (like the sacred axioms which were, for their elders, "sufficient to the day"), they "pencil" their way forward into the "quadrangles" of the university, to write their own "grammar/of imperatives".

It is clear that Heaney does not regard himself as one of these "Young heads". Here he tries to admit the thinking of those who want to uproot the old faith and turn it on its head, tries to open himself up to what it would mean to live in that "grammar". As he shows in "Alphabets", he "understands", through his own education, that we are all bounded by the language in which we figure ourselves to ourselves. But his connection with the old faith is strong, making it hard for him to see it as anathema, the source of his damnation, and hard to accept that the wielding of crowbars is not just "unmannerly", but ultimately destructive.

The two italicized statements which open the third section are vested with authority:

*What looks the strongest has outlived its term.*
*The future lies with what's affirmed from under.*

On whose behalf are these lines spoken? If they are read as the words of the "Young heads", the first line might be a description of the generation who came before them whose suffering seemed to have got them nowhere; and the second, a description of themselves, coming up "from under", vigorously uprooting and making into anachronisms the beliefs of their forefathers to replace them with their own. But we can also imagine these words being spoken on behalf of the older generation, pointing out how quickly the young "intelligences" were content to discard the beliefs and suffering of the previous generation, without examination, as if they were worthless, without looking for the discoveries that might lie inside. In other words, though they might look the strongest (crowbar-like), they have already "outlived" their short "term". Both groups are presented as "impervious" rather than receptive, content to accept "generalizations" as truth: the older generation clinging to their "faith" that things cannot change or be changed, the young to their conviction that the old ways must be left behind. The two lines seem to me to be asserting that all genuine exploration into the meaning of our lives must come back to what is inescapably true—"what's affirmed from under". But Heaney is at his best when he is actually affirming from under in his poetry, rather than talking about it, just as the truth is evoked more powerfully in specific circumstances than in abstract generalizations.

These lines seem to be a text for the "weighing and weighing" and the shifts in perspectives that we are familiar with in Heaney's thinking about his own life and work. He is rooted in old humanistic ways of thinking which are being moved out. In one way he can tap into that, explore it

without feeling threatened (as in the poem "Alphabets", for example). But he can also see the need for a long view, the need for people to believe that they are not just leaves in the wind. Even if the faith they have lived by is turned on its head, rendered valueless in a new system of values, they still need to be able to believe in continuity and in change. The last section of this poem conveys how he feels these contradictions, as well as thinks about them:

> These things that corroborated us when we dwelt
> under the aegis of our stealthy patron,
> the guardian angel of passivity,
> now sink a fang of menace in my shoulder.
> I repeat the word 'stricken' to myself
> and stand bareheaded under the banked clouds
> edged more and more with brassy thunderlight.

While he wants to expose himself, bareheaded, to the impending downpour, he also wants something clear and "uncompromised" to come out of the confusion and difference.

> I yearn for hammerblows on clinkered planks,
> the uncompromised report of driven thole-pins,
> to know there is one among us who never swerved
> from all his instincts told him was right action,
> who stood his ground in the indicative,
> whose boat will lift when the cloudburst happens.

This "yearn[ing]" to believe in a contemporary Noah who "stood his ground"—who did not flinch in front of the lantern—is strongly felt. In many of his earlier poems Heaney has explored the lives of such singular individuals. Perhaps because this poem is written from an imaginary place, "From the Canton of Expectation", he seems to have lost touch with the actual fact of people standing their ground every day, all over the world—the many "small people" who do not "swerve" from what their instinct tell them is "right action". The truth takes various forms, at various moments in individual lives, and there is no "diamond absolute" moment, or man, or metaphor, which will encapsulate it. Because that is

what Heaney "yearn[s] for", it is not surprising that he is drawn to these experiments with allegory; he is living in another world, or worlds, while he conducts his search—but since he wants to find meaning not in an abstract mental place but in an actual physical place inhabited by real people, he needs to re-establish contact with the "x" and the "o" of the actual, to "finger slime" again. We see the returning of this realization in "The Mud Vision", a poem which conveys Heaney's aspirations and shortcomings in this volume, and also his faith and his doubt.

In "The Mud Vision" Heaney tries to create a miracle without describing it in terms associated with other visions. He attempts to create from base matter, from the origins of life itself, a vision unlike any other. How can anyone create a miracle or vision which has never appeared before? The ingredients of this vision are familiar to Heaney's readers: "mud" and "clay" and "mould" have been a feature of his poetry from the beginning, as have the metaphor of life as a car journey, and the rural setting, and the references to religious rituals. We are clearly in Heaney country here:

> . . . the east gable
> Where its trembling corolla had balanced
> Was starkly a ruin again, and dandelions
> Blowing high up on the ledges, and moss
> That slumbered on through its increase. . . .

Yet this vision is also unfamiliar, as the disconcerting combinations of words suggest: "the glittery damp", "a gossamer wheel", "nebulous dirt, sullied yet lucent." Although some of its qualities are dependent on the language of faith—"a rose window of mud" or "Original clay/transfigured and spinning"—the vision rises up as an unknowable entity, so that the reader, like the people in the poem, does not know what to make of it.

The poem describes how the mud infiltrates everything, leaving people with no escape from it because sensual interaction with the world is changed. As a result of the supernatural "vision" people can no longer glory in their powers of natural vision: the "sunsets [run] murky", the "rainbow/[curves] flood-brown and [runs] like a water-rat's back". And because of the mud on the windscreen they can no longer see clearly where they are going. The tastes and smells they know are also changed, as their stores of drinking water and their plants absorb the mud. As if this were not disturbing enough, their way of symbolically representing their world changes too: water is no longer pure, "bulrushes ousted the lilies" and the healing verbena loses its potent scent. Even the people themselves begin to undergo a metamorphosis: their skin becomes browner, and their hair acquires "a light fuzz", as if the long process of evolution had turned back on itself to the point where their exhalations leave "a light/Furrow-breath on the pillow".

Is this a "vision" or a nightmare? The people can see only what they have lost by its coming, so it is no wonder they "wished it away". And "yet [they] presumed it a test/That would prove [them] beyond expectation", an opportunity for them to become the chosen people. "The Mud Vision" imagines one form that the "cloudburst" anticipated at the end of "From the Canton of Expectation" might take, the big "test" that would "prove" people one way or the other and that would transcend the "faults-on-both-sides tact" of "Expectation". But this poem doubts that such a vision or test would make the world any clearer.

Even before the vision's appearance, the people could not read the signs of their own times. They were confused by the conflicting messages of "Statues with exposed hearts" and of different "idols on tour", the slogans

of "punks" and the "blessings of popes", the signs of war ("casualties on their stretchers") and of peace ("hares flitt[ing] beneath/The dozing bellies of jets"). They "sleepwalked/The line between panic and formulae", vacillating between groundless fears and rules or prescriptions which no longer seem to offer them direction. The significance of a single, extraordinary vision, incomparable to anything they had perceived before, increases rather than clarifies their confusion.

Yet the poem itself creates a way of understanding the people's dilemma not as a problem, but as the condition of life. It is only human to long for clarity and certainty, to want to know where you are going, but at the same time certainty is almost always an illusion and the peaceful repose that comes with absolute knowledge is a kind of death. So what Heaney is trying to envisage in the poem, in order to try and explore this idea, is a way of responding to life which privileges confusion and muddiness, which makes obscurity "spell universal good" instead of an evil that must be washed away, and which turns confusion into a "rose window of mud"—greater than the "pulsing rose" of the comet, because it is a triumph of man's creative, intellectual and spiritual achievement.

When people are permeated by mud, it affects the way they see the world. In Heaney's poem, it is only after the vision has "gone" that the people could see it as a "clarified place". Its absence proved what it had been, like the "bright nowhere" which took the place of the chestnut tree in "Clearances". Similarly, it is only in retrospect that the poet, and the reader, can see the pattern of his discovery. In confounding the expectation that it is not possible to make a vision out of mud, this poem creates its own "clarified space", and provides a way for Heaney to "dive to a future".

## *BIBLIOGRAPHY*

### PRIMARY SOURCES


*POETRY*

*Death of a Naturalist*. London: Faber and Faber, 1966.
*Door into the Dark*. London: Faber and Faber, 1969.
*Wintering Out*. London: Faber and Faber, 1972.
*North*. London: Faber and Faber, 1975.
*Field Work*. London: Faber and Faber, 1979.
*Selected Poems 1965-1975*. London: Faber and Faber, 1980.
*Sweeney Astray*. London: Faber and Faber, 1984.
*Station Island*. London: Faber and Faber, 1984.
*The Haw Lantern*. London: Faber and Faber, 1987.
*New Selected Poems 1966-1987*. London: Faber and Faber, 1990.
*Seeing Things*. London: Faber and Faber, 1991.

*ESSAYS & LECTURES*

"Anglo-Irish Occasions." *London Review of Books*, 5 May 1988, p.9.
"Brodsky's Nobel Prize." *Literary Half-Yearly*, 29, No. 1 (1988), 3-8.
"Current Unstated Assumptions About Poetry: I" *Critical Inquiry*, 7, No. 4 (1981), 646-51.
"Envies and Identifications: Dante and the Modern Poet." *Irish University Review*, 15, No. 1 (1985), 5-19.
"Forked Tongues, Ceilis and Incubators." *Fortnight*, September 1983, pp.18-21.
*The Government of the Tongue: The 1986 T.S. Eliot Memorial Lectures and other Critical Writings*. London: Faber and Faber, 1988.
"Learning from Eliot." *Agenda*, 27, No. 1 (1989), 17-31.
"Mother Ireland." *Listener*, 7 December 1972, p.790.
*The Place of Writing*. Atlanta, Georgia: Scholars Press, 1989.
"Poet to Poet: Seamus Heaney on Patrick Kavanagh: A Poet's Blessing." *Listener*, 19 April 1984, pp.13-14.
*Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1968-78*. London: Faber and Faber, 1980.
*The Redress of Poetry: An Inaugural Lecture, University of Oxford, 24 October 1989*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990.

*INTERVIEWS*

"Poetry and Politics: A conversation between Seamus Heaney and Joseph Brodsky." *Magill*, 9, No. 2 (1985), 40-43, 46-48.
"Talk with Seamus Heaney" (Seamus Deane). *New York Times Book Review*, 2 December 1979, pp.47-8.
"Unhappy and at Home" (Seamus Deane). *The Crane Bag*, 1, No. 1 (1977), 61-67.
"Raindrop on a Thorn: An Interview with Seamus Heaney" (Robert Druce). *Dutch Quarterly Review*, 9, No. 1 (1979), 24-37.

"Meeting Seamus Heaney: An Interview" (John Haffenden). *London Magazine*, NS 19, No. 3 (1979), 5-28.
"Artists on Art: An Interview with Seamus Heaney" (Frank Kinahan). *Critical Inquiry*, 8, No. 3 (1982), 405-14.
"Interview with Seamus Heaney" (Helen O'Shea). *Quadrant*, September 1981, pp.12-17.
"An Interview with Seamus Heaney" (James Randall). *Ploughshares*, 5, No. 3 (1979), 7-22.
"Poets' Round Table: 'A Common Language' " (Michael Schmidt). *PN Review*, 15, No. 4 (1989), 39-47.

## SECONDARY SOURCES

### CRITICAL WORKS

#### *BOOKS*

Allen, Michael and Angela Wilcox, eds. *Critical Approaches to Anglo-Irish Literature*. Irish Literary Studies 29. Gerards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1989.
Andrews, Elmer. *Seamus Heaney: All the Realm of Whisper*. London: Macmillan, 1989.
Annwn, David. *Inhabited Voices: Myth and History in the Poetry of Geoffrey Hill, Seamus Heaney and George Mackay Brown*. Frome, Somerset: Bran's Head, 1984.
Barfoot, C.C. and Theo D'haen, eds. *The Clash of Ireland: Literary Contrasts and Connections*. D.Q.R. Studies in Literature 4. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1989.
Brown, Merle E. *Double Lyric: Divisiveness and Communal Creativity in Recent English Poetry*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980.
Brown, Terence. *Ireland's Literature: Selected Essays*. Mullingar: The Lilliput Press, 1988.
———. *Northern Voices: Poets from Ulster*. Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1975.
Burris, Sidney. *The Poetry of Resistance: Seamus Heaney and the Pastoral Tradition*. Athens: Ohio Univ. Press, 1990.
Buttel, Robert. *Seamus Heaney*. Lewisburg: Bucknell Univ. Press, 1975.
Corcoran, Neil. *Seamus Heaney*. London: Faber and Faber, 1986.
Curtis, Tony, ed. *The Art of Seamus Heaney*. Bridgend: Poetry Wales Press, 1985.
Deane, Seamus. *Celtic Revivals: Essays in Modern Irish Literature 1880-1980*. London: Faber and Faber, 1985.
Dunn, Douglas, ed. *Two Decades of Irish Writing: A Critical Survey*. Manchester: Carcanet, 1975.
Foster, Thomas. *Seamus Heaney*. Boston: Twayne, 1989.

Garratt, Robert F. *Modern Irish Poetry: Tradition and Continuity from Yeats to Heaney*. Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1986.
Haffenden, John. *Poets in Conversation with John Haffenden*. London: Faber and Faber, 1981.
Harmon, Maurice, ed. *The Irish Writer and the City*. Irish Literary Studies 18. Gerards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1984.
Hederman, Mark Patrick and Richard Kearney, eds. *The Crane Bag Book of Irish Studies 1977-1981*. Dublin: Blackwater Press, 1982.
Johnston, Dillon. *Irish Poetry After Joyce*. Notre Dame: Notre Dame Univ. Press, 1985.
Jones, Peter and Michael Schmidt, eds. *British Poetry Since 1970: A Critical Survey*. Manchester: Carcanet, 1980.
Keane, Patrick J. *Terrible Beauty: Yeats, Joyce, Ireland, and the Myth of the Devouring Female*. Columbia: Missouri Univ. Press, 1988.
Kearney, Richard. *Transitions: Narratives In Modern Irish Culture*. Manchester: Manchester Univ. Press, 1988.
Kenner, Hugh. *A Colder Eye: The Modern Irish Writers*. New York: Knopf, 1983.
King, P.R. *Nine Contemporary Poets*. London: Methuen, 1979.
Longley, Edna. *Poetry in the Wars*. Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Bloodaxe, 1986.
Morrison, Blake. *Seamus Heaney*. London: Methuen, 1982.
Morrison, Blake and Andrew Motion, eds. *The Penguin Book of Contemporary British Poetry*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1982.
Ricks, Christopher. *The Force of Poetry*. London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1984.
Robinson, Alan. *Instabilities in Contemporary British Poetry*. London: Macmillan, 1988.
Rosenthal, M.L. and Sally M. Gall. *The Modern Poetic Sequence: The Genius of Modern Poetry*. New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1983.
Sekine, Masaru, ed. *Irish Writers and Society at Large*. Irish Literary Studies 22. Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1985.
Tamplin, Ronald. *Seamus Heaney*. Milton Keynes: Open Univ. Press, 1989.
Thwaite, Anthony. *Poetry Today: A Critical Guide to British Poetry 1960-1984*. London: Longmans, 1985.
Trotter, David. *The Making of the Reader: Language and Subjectivity in Modern American, English and Irish Poetry*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1985.
Vance, Norman. *Irish Literature: A Social History: Tradition, Identity and Difference*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1989.
Vendler, Helen. *The Music of What Happens: Poems, Poets, Critics*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1988.

*ARTICLES AND REVIEWS*

Alvarez, A. "A Fine Way with the Language." Review of *Field Work*. *New York Review of Books*, 6 March 1980, pp.16-17.

Anderson, Nathalie F. "Queasy Proximity: Seamus Heaney's Mythical Method." *Eire-Ireland*, 23, No. 4 (1988), 103-13.

Bayley, John. "Living In and Living Out: The Poet's Location for the Poetry." *Agenda*. Seamus Heaney Fiftieth Birthday Issue, 27, No. 1 (1989), 32-36.

————. "Song and Suffering." Review of *The Government of the Tongue*. *Poetry Review*, 78, No. 3 (1988), 46-47.

Bedford, William. "To Set the Darkness Echoing." *Delta*, 56 (1977), 2-7.

Beeton, D.R. Review of *Field Work*. *UNISA English Studies*, 19, No. 2 (1981), 57-61.

Bloom, Harold. "The Voice of Kinship." Review of *Field Work*. *Times Literary Supplement*, 8 February 1980, pp.137-38.

Bredin, Hugh. "A Language of Courage and Love of Objects." Review of *Station Island*. *Fortnight*, November 1984, pp.18, 20.

Browne, Joseph. "Violent Prophecies: The Writer and Northern Ireland." *Eire-Ireland*, 10, No. 2 (1975), 109-19.

Brownjohn, Alan. "The Nub." Review of *North*. *New Statesman*, 11 July 1975, p.39.

Cahill, Eileen. "A Silent Voice: Seamus Heaney and Ulster Politics." *Critical Quarterly*, 29, No. 3 (1987), 55-70.

Carson, Ciaran. "Escaped from the Massacre?" Review of *North*. *Honest Ulsterman*, 50 (1975), 183-86.

Corcoran, Neil. "From the Frontier of Writing." Review of *The Haw Lantern*. *Times Literary Supplement*, 26 June 1987, pp.681-82.

————. "Stillness Into History." Review of *Gravities*. *PN Review*, 7, No. 4 (1980), 55-56.

Cotter, James Finn. "Poetry Marathon." *Hudson Review*, 37, No. 3 (1984), 496-507.

Curtis, Simon. "Seamus Heaney's *North*." Review of *North*. *Critical Quarterly*, 18, No. 1 (1976), 81-83.

Dalton, G.F. "The Tradition of Blood Sacrifice to the Goddess Eire." *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review*, 63, No. 252 (1974), 343-54.

Dawe, Gerald. "Shifting Ground." Review of *New Selected Poems 1966-87*. *Fortnight*, June 1990, pp.23-24.

Dunn, Douglas. "Heaney Agonistes." *London Magazine*, NS 24, No. 8 (1984), 92-95.

————. "Mañana is now." *Encounter*, 45, No. 5 (1975), 76-81.

Eagleton, Terry. Review of *Field Work*. *Stand*, 21, No. 3 (1980), 76-78.

————. Review of *North*. *Stand*, 17, No. 1 (1976), 76-78.

Ehrenpreis, Irvin. "Digging In." Review of *Poems 1965-75*. *New York Review of Books*, 8 October 1981, pp.45-47.

Ewart, Gavin. "Chicken Soup." Review of *Wintering Out*. *London Magazine*, NS 12, No. 5 (1972), 132-35.

Fenton, James. "A Dangerous Landscape." Review of *Field Work*. *Hibernia*, 25 October 1979, p.14.

Forbes, Peter. "The Growth of a Poet's Mind." Review of *The Haw Lantern*. *Listener*, 9 July 1987, pp.29-30.

Foster, John Wilson. "The Poetry of Seamus Heaney." *Critical Quarterly*, 16, No. 1 (1974) 35-48.

———. "Seamus Heaney's 'A Lough Neagh Sequence': Sources and Motifs." *Eire-Ireland*, 12, No. 2 (1977), 138-42.

Gibbons, Reginald. Review of *Station Island*. *TriQuarterly* 66 (1986), 215-20.

Glen, Heather. "Seamus Heaney's Englands of the Mind." *The Critical Review*, 27 (1985), 98-109.

Grant, Damian. "Body Poetic: The Function of a Metaphor in Three Irish Poets." *Poetry Nation*, 1 (1973), 112-125.

———. "Verbal Events." Review of *Wintering Out*. *Critical Quarterly* 16, No. 1 (1974), 81-86.

Haberstroh, Patricia Boyle. "Poet, Poetry, Painting, and Artist in Seamus Heaney's *North*." *Eire-Ireland*, 23, No. 4 (1988), 124-132.

Hamilton, Ian. "Excusez-moi." Review of *The Haw Lantern*. *London Review of Books*, 1 October 1987, pp.10-11.

Harmon, Maurice. Review of *Station Island*. *Irish University Review*, 15, No. 1 (1985), 93-97.

Hart, Henry. "Ghostly Colloquies: Seamus Heaney's 'Station Island'." *Irish University Review*, 18, No. 2 (1988), 233-52.

———. "History, Myth, and Apocalypse in Seamus Heaney's *North*." *Contemporary Literarure*, 30, No. 3 (1989), 387-411.

———. "Pastoral and Anti-Pastoral in Seamus Heaney's Early Poetry." *Southern Review*, 23, No. 3 (1987), 569-88.

———. "Seamus Heaney's Poetry of Meditation: *Door into the Dark*." *Twentieth Century Literature*, 33, No. 1 (1987), 1-17.

Hildebidle, John. "A Decade of Seamus Heaney's Poetry." *Massachusetts Review*, 28, No. 3 (1987), 393-409.

Hulse, Michael. "Sweeney Heaney: Seamus Heaney's *Station Island*." *Quadrant*, May 1986, pp.72-75.

Johnston, Conor. "Poetry and Politics: Responses to the Northern Ireland Crisis in the Poetry of John Montague, Derek Mahon, and Seamus Heaney." *Poesis*, 5, No. 4 (1984), 12-35.

———. "Seamus Heaney, Sweeney, and *Station Island*." *Eire-Ireland*, 22, No. 2 (1987), 70-95.

Johnston, Dillon. "The Enabling Ritual: Irish Poetry in the Seventies." *Shenandoah*, 25, No. 4 (1974), 3-24.

Jolly, Roslyn. "Transformations of Caliban and Ariel: Imagination and Language in David Malouf, Margaret Atwood and Seamus Heaney." *World Literature in English*, 26, No. 2 (1986), 295-330.

Lafferty, James J. "Gifts from the Goddess: Heaney's 'Bog People'." *Eire-Ireland*, 17, No. 3 (1982), 127-36.

Liddy, James. "Ulster Poets and the Catholic Muse." *Eire-Ireland*, 13, No. 4 (1978), 126-37.

Lloyd, David. "Seamus Heaney's *Field Work*." *Ariel*, 12, No. 2 (1981), 87-92.

Longley, Edna. "Fire and Air." *Honest Ulsterman*, 50 (1975), 179-83.

———. "Old Pewter." Review of *Station Island*. *Honest Ulsterman*, 77 (1984), 54-58.

Lucas, John. "Prodigal Son." Review of *Station Island*. *New Statesman*, 7 December 1984, pp.32, 34.

Lucy, Sean. Review of *Wintering Out*. *Irish University Review*, 3, No. 2 (1973), 181-83.

McCurry, Jacqueline. "The Female in Seamus Heaney's Prose Poetics and the Poetry of *The Haw Lantern*." *Eire-Ireland*, 23, No. 4 (1988), 114-23.

McGuinness, Arthur E. " 'Hoarder of the Common Ground': Tradition and Ritual in Seamus Heaney's Poetry." *Eire-Ireland*, 13, No. 2 (1978), 71-92.

———. "The Craft of Diction: Revision in Seamus Heaney's Poems." *Irish University Review*, 9, No. 1 (1979) 62-91.

McLoughlin, Jim. "The Plain Person's Guide to Seamus Heaney." Review of Neil Corcoran's *Seamus Heaney*. *Fortnight*, December 1986, p.19.

Mahon, Derek. "Poetry in Northern Ireland." *Twentieth Century Studies*, No. 4 (1970), 89-93.

Mahony, Phillip. "Seamus Heaney and the Violence in Northern Ireland." *The Journal of Irish Literature*, 11, No. 3 (1982), 20-30.

Maxwell, D.E.S. "Imagining the North: Violence and the Writers." *Eire-Ireland*, 8, No. 2 (1973), 91-107.

May, D. "Peace in Ireland." Review of *Field Work*. *Listener*, 22 November 1979, pp.720-21.

Mendelson, Edward. "Poetry as Fate and Faith." Review of *The Government of the Tongue*. *Times Literary Supplement*, 1 July 1988, p.726.

Montague, John. "Order in Donnybrook Fair." *Times Literary Supplement*, 17 March 1972, p.313.

———. "Tarzan Among the Nightingales." Review of *Sweeney Astray*. *Fortnight*, December 1983, p.27.

Morrison, Blake. "Encounters with Familiar Ghosts." Review of *Station Island*. *Times Literary Supplement*, 19 October 1984, pp.1191-92.

———. "Out from the Shoal." Review of *Field Work*. *New Statesman*, 9 November 1979, pp.722-23.

Murphy, Richard. "Poetry and Terror." Review of *North*. *New York Review of Books*, 30 September 1976, pp.38-40.

O'Brien, Conor Cruise. "An Unhealthy Intersection." *New Review*, 2, No. 16 (1975), 3-8.

———. "A Slow North-East Wind." Review of *North*. *Listener*, 25 September 1975, p.405.

O'Brien, George. "Incertus Redux." Review of *Station Island*, *Sweeney Astray* and *Preoccupations*. *Cambridge Quarterly*, 15, No. 1 (1986), 70-76.

O'Driscoll, Denis. "In the Mid-Course of His Life." *Hibernia*, 11 October 1979, p.13.

Parini, Jay. "Seamus Heaney: The Ground Possessed." *Southern Review*, 16, No. 1 (1980), 100-23.

Pinsky, Robert. Review of *Field Work*. *New Republic*, 22 December 1979, pp.31-33.

Pritchard, William. "More Poetry Matters." Review of *North*. *Hudson Review*, 29 (1976), 453-63.

Quinlan, Kieran. "Unearthing a Terrible Beauty: Seamus Heaney's Victims of Violence." *World Literature Today*, 57, No. 3 (1983), 19-28.

Rainey, Brian E. "The 'Irish Thing': Cultural Reactions to the Troubles in Ulster." *UNISA English Studies*, 19, No. 2 (1981), 1-10.

Redshaw, Thomas Dillon. "*Rí* as in Regional: The Ulster Poets." *Eire-Ireland*, 9, No. 2 (1974), 41-64.

Regan, Stephen. "The Poetry and Prose of Seamus Heaney." *University of Toronto Quarterly*, 53, No. 3 (1982), 306-13.

Scammell, William. "The Children of Art and Life." Review of *The Government of the Tongue*. *Guardian Weekly*, 3 July 1988, p.29.

Schirmer, Gregory A. "Seamus Heaney's 'Salvation in Surrender'." *Eire-Ireland*, 15, No. 4 (1980), 139-46.

Simmons, James. Review of *Door into the Dark*. *Honest Ulsterman*, 16 (1969), 26-9.

———. "The New Seamus Heaney." Review of *Field Work*. *Honest Ulsterman*, 65 (1980), 57-63.

Smith, Stan. "Escape from the Massacre." Review of *North*. *PN Review* 4, No. 2 (1977), 61-64.

Stallworthy, Jon. "The Poet as Archaeologist: W.B. Yeats and Seamus Heaney." *Review of English Studies*, NS 33 (1982), 158-74.

Stanfield, Paul Scott. "Facing *North* Again: Polyphony, Contention." *Eire-Ireland*, 23, No. 4 (1988), 133-44.

Thwaite, Anthony. "Neighbourly Murders." Review of *North*. *Times Literary Supplement*, 1 August 1975, p.866.

Trotter, David. "Troubles." Review of *The Government of the Tongue*. *London Review of Books*, 23 June 1988, pp.11-12.

Vance, Norman. "Imagining Ireland." *Queen's Quarterly*, 94, No. 1 (1987), 105-13.

Vendler, Helen. "Second Thoughts." Review of *The Haw Lantern*. *New York Review of Books*, 28 April 1988, pp.41-45.

Washington, Peter. "Doleful." Review of *North*. *Spectator*, 6 September 1975, pp.314-15.

Waterman, Andrew. "Keep It In The Six Counties, Heaney!" Review of *The Haw Lantern*. *PN Review*, 15, No. 6 (1989), 37-41.Young, Augustus. "Poet without a Safety Net." Review of *The Haw Lantern*. *Fortnight*, September 1987, pp.6-7.

***OTHER WORKS CONSULTED***

Aalen, F.H.A. *Man and the Landscape in Ireland*. London: Academic Press, 1978.

Briggs, Katharine M. *A Dictionary of British Folk-Tales*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1970.

Brown, Malcolm. *The Politics of Irish Literature: From Thomas Davis to W.B. Yeats*. London: Allen & Unwin, 1972.

Brown, Terence. *Ireland: A Social and Cultural History, 1922-1979*. Glasgow: Fontana Paperbacks, 1981.

Buckley, Vincent. *Memory Ireland*. Ringwood, Vic.: Penguin Australia, 1985.

Corkery, Daniel. *The Hidden Ireland: A Study of Gaelic Munster in the Eighteenth Century*. Dublin: M.H. Gill & Son Ltd., 1925.

Devlin, Polly. *All of Us There*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1983.

Dick, Oliver Lawson, ed. *Aubrey's Brief Lives*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1962.

Dickens, Charles. *A Tale of Two Cities*. London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1910.

Eliot, T.S. *Collected Poems 1909-1966*. London: Faber and Faber, 1963.

———. *Selected Essays*. London: Faber and Faber, 1932.

Ellis Davidson, H.R. *Scandinavian Mythology*. London: Hamlyn, 1969.

Falck, Colin. *Myth, Truth and Literature: Towards a True Post-Modernism*. Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1989.

Feder, Lillian. *Crowell's Handbook of Classical Literature*. New York: Lippincott & Crowell, 1964.

Foster, R.F. *Modern Ireland 1600-1972*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1989.

Gittings, Robert, ed. *Letters of John Keats*. London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1970.

Glob, P.V. *The Bog People: Iron-Age Man Preserved*. trans. Rupert Bruce-Mitford. London: Faber and Faber, 1969.

Grant, Michael and John Hazel. *Who's Who in Classical Mythology*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1973.

Greene, David H. and Edward M. Stephens. *J.M. Synge: 1871-1909*. New York: New York Univ. Press, 1989.

Harbison, Peter. *The Archaeology of Ireland*. London: Bodley Head, 1976.

Hardy, Thomas. *The Return of the Native*. 1878; London: Macmillan, 1974.

Harmon, Maurice, ed. *Image and Illusion: Anglo-Irish Literature and its Contexts*. Portmarnock, Co. Dublin: Wolfhound Press, 1979.
Hegel, G.W.F. *The Phenomonology of Mind*, trans. J.B. Baillie, New York: Harper & Row, 1967.
Heidegger, Martin. *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter. New York: Harper & Row, 1975.
Hunter, Jefferson. *Image and Word: The Interaction of Twentieth-Century Photographs and Texts*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1987.
Johnson, Samuel. *Lives of the English Poets*. ed. John Hardy. London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1968.
Joyce, James. *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973.
———. *Finnegans Wake*. New York: Viking, 1939.
———. *Ulysses*. London: Bodley Head, 1968.
Kearney, Richard. *Myth and Motherland*. Derry: Field Day Theatre Company Limited, 1984.
Kee, Robert. *Ireland: A History*. London: Abacus, 1980.
Kiberd, Declan. *Synge and the Irish Language*. London: Macmillan, 1979.
Langbaum, Robert. *The Poetry of Experience: The Dramatic Monologue in Modern Literary Tradition*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1974.
Lewis, Charlton T. and Charles Short. *A Latin Dictionary: Founded on Andrews' Edition of* Freund's Latin Dictionary. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975.
Loughrey, Patrick, ed. *The People of Ireland*. New York: New Amsterdam Books, 1988.
MacDonagh, Oliver. *States of Mind: A Study of Anglo-Irish Conflict 1780-1980*. London: Allen & Unwin, 1985.
MacDonagh, Oliver, W.F. Mandle and Paul Travers, eds. *Irish Culture and Nationalism 1750-1950*. London: Macmillan, 1983.
Magnussen, Magnus and Hermann Palsson, trans. and introduction. *Njal's Saga*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1960.
Matthias, John, ed. *23 Modern British Poets*. Chicago: Swallow Press, 1971.
McCormack, W.J. and Alistair Stead, eds. *James Joyce and Modern Literature*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1982.
McLaverty, Michael. *Lost Fields*. New York: Longmans & Co., 1941.
Milton, John. *Paradise Lost*. ed. Alistair Fowler. London: Longmans, 1971.
Musa, Mark, trans. *Dante's Inferno*. Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1971.
———. *Dante's Purgatory*. Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1981.
Nolan, David, ed. *Dante Commentaries: Eight Studies of* The Divine Comedy. Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 1977.
O'Brien, Conor Cruise. *States of Ireland*. London: Hutchinson, 1972.

O'Tuama, Seán and Thomas Kinsella. *An Duanaire 1600-1900: Poems of the Dispossessed*. Portlaoise, Ireland: Dolmen Press, 1981.
Smyth, Daragh. *A Guide to Irish Mythology*. Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 1988.
Spenser, Edmund. *A View of the Present State of Ireland*. ed. W.L. Renwick. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970.
Stewart, A.T.Q. *The Narrow Ground: The Roots of Conflict in Ulster*. London: Faber and Faber, 1989.
Synge, John Millington. *Collected Works*. London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1962.
Tacitus. *The Agricola and the Germania*. trans. with an introduction by H. Mattingly, trans. revised by S.A. Handford. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970.
Trilling, Lionel. *Sincerity & Authenticity*. London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1972.
Turville-Petre, E.O.G. *Myth and Religion of the North: The Religion of Ancient Scandinavia*. London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1964.
Vico, Giambattista. *The New Science*. trans. T.G.B. & M.H. Fisch, Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1975.
Wordsworth, William. *Poetical Works*. ed. Ernest de Selincourt. London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1969.
Yeats, William Butler. *Collected Poems*. London: Macmillan, 1977.